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CANADIAN LITERATURE

A Guide

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A Guide

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INTRODUCTION

In 1980, the Co-ordinating Committee for Media of the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada presented a paper recommending the development of a television series on present-day Canadian literature. Reaction to the paper was favorable, and so the Committee asked each province to appoint a literature specialist to a project team. The team met in 1982, TVOntario acting as facilitator, and produced a proposal for a twenty-five-part television series: a thirty-minute introductory program and twenty-four, fifteen-minute programs, each profiling the life and work of a Canadian writer in the form of an interview.

The project team endeavoured to select writers in various parts of the country, a mix of male and female, of emergent and established, whose creativity has produced short stories, poems, novels, and plays. Further, it was decided that these interviews would be informal, would let the writers speak for themselves, thus encouraging the viewers—primarily senior-high language arts and entry-level college students—to form their own opinion of these writers and their contribution to literature.

The thirty-minute program

Entitled "Perspectives," this program features comments by sixteen of those interviewed. They discuss Canadian literature from three broad perspectives: the literary tradition; the creative process; and the impact of landscape upon literature. Thus, Fred Cogswell tells us why he considers himself a traditionalist, and Anne Cameron describes the oral tradition of the west coast. Al Purdy offers his succinct reaction to our literary inheritance: "I don't think there were any great people back there, but they're ours, and we're stuck," and Alice Munro and Milton Acorn explain why they write and how they go about it. Gwendolyn MacEwen talks about her feeling that Canada is just as exciting and exotic as the eastern countries of her poetry, and Irving Layton talks about the "mocking laughter" of the great, desolate Canadian landscape.

The fifteen-minute television programs

In each program a writer comments on his or her experience of writing. For instance, Robert Kroetsch takes viewers to his home town of Heisler, Alberta, and to the Battle River Valley, where Indian artifacts are still found, artifacts like the one he describes in his "Stone Hammer Poem." The camera visits the secluded cabin on the coast of Cape Breton Island where Alistair MacLeod writes his short stories. Excerpts from "The Martyrology" are read by bp Nichol. Roch Carrier describes how he got his first story published—by signing it with the name of a well-known writer instead of his own. Earle Birney gives a reading of his sound poem, "Trawna Tuh Belvul by Knayjin Psifik." Sharon Pollock explains why she was attracted to a character like Lizzie Borden, and W.O. Mitchell, once an actor himself, presents *The Vanishing Point*.

The *Guide*

This publication supplements the television series. It expands upon the interviews with the writers in a section called "A conversation with..." and includes the literary material read or produced in each fifteen-minute program, or excerpts where length or copyright restrictions preclude reproducing a work in its entirety. There are sections on each writer entitled "For Understanding and Discussion" and "For Further Study," plus a list of relevant works and a biographical note. The ***Guide*** also contains a select bibliography of works on Canadian literature.

Utilizing the television programs and the *Guide*

These interviews with twenty-four Canadian authors, poets, and playwrights enable viewers to learn first-hand why and how these men and women became writers, and the nature of their writings. *CANADIAN LITERATURE* has two main objectives. First, to motivate its audience to learn more about these writers, to investigate more of their work. Second, to initiate discussion on

a variety of topics. Why are there different styles in prose and poetry? What is the relationship between form and meaning in writing? What makes a work of art universal in its appeal?

The ***Guide*** is primarily a source of background reading prior to viewing the programs. Each of the sections entitled "A conversation with..." contains the main topics of discussion, while the literary works provided offer examples of content and style. The sections "For Understanding and Discussion" and "For Further Study" are intended to help develop insight into the nature of the writing. (Where the former requires study of excerpted material, the latter involves the reading of an entire work.) The "Relevant Work" section is limited to the material presented or discussed in the program, or to that mentioned in "For Further Study." In the case of prolific writers, for example, Birney and Layton, collected editions are also included, since early works, though theoretically in circulation, may be available only in expensive, hardback editions, or may be out-of-print.

CANADIAN LITERATURE has been designed as a comprehensive, yet flexible, package that lends itself to a variety of learning approaches.

A conversation with

MILTON ACORN

I was born in the Prince Edward Island Hospital, just outside of Charlottetown. . . . We weren't exactly poor, but we weren't among the rich, either. We had a very close family of five. . . . I had an education, but most of my teachers said I didn't need it. I read. I read an awful lot. I peddled papers and read the papers. And I would go wandering. . . . I was an enthusiastic fighter. Trouble was, I wasn't very good. The truth is, I wasn't any good. But I got lots of practice, and this eventually helped me on my newspaper route because I'd fought about every boy in town, and, naturally, we were friends from then on. From then on, those boys were my protectors.

. . . In 1939, I left to join the army. I was discharged in 1942. In 1947, I came back to the Island to take a carpentry course and left again. I ended up in Sept Isles, of all places. Got fired in Sept Isles. I walked down the street. . . . And then, down the other side of the street walked a man, an Acadian. Within a couple of hours, he had me a job, a place to sleep, a place to eat, and I stayed there as long as I could. Finally . . . I took the little ferry back to the south shore and headed home to Prince Edward Island. I worked for awhile, and then I was off again to Montreal. I don't know what drew me to Montreal so many times. And after Montreal, it was Toronto. And always, all sorts of places where I didn't want to be. But, I guess I was recording the age. I was recording the bizarre age I was living in, and I met people, and I wrote about people.

. . . I think of myself as [belonging to] the bardic tradition. A bard is very concerned with the music of language. A bard is concerned with the working people. A bard is concerned with all people. No one is less a person to a bard because they're a working person. . . . A bard has respect for any person, no matter what his or her position may be in society.

. . . To write in a somewhat regular and coherent way, to make the best use of the voice, to pay respect to the working man, to write of natural things—all these are forbidden today in those notorious, terrible, creative writing classes. But I just go on doing it. And the rage of academics is awful. . . . That someone dares to write poetry differently than they instruct. And that's very real . . .

[Who has influenced my writing?] First it was Al Purdy, and before that, before I really started writing, it was Dorothy Livesay, Joe Wallace, and a lot of others. There are an awful lot who influenced my writing, and, above all, F.R. Scott. Great Scott, as they call him. [This is] very funny, because he was very, very smooth, and I . . . was rough and ready.

. . . Ryerson Press wanted a book. So, I gave them fifty poems, and they said, there's got to be a selection. We can't publish fifty poems right now—an unknown poet. . . . I wasn't unknown. . . . I said, okay, make a selection. So, Jay Macpherson made a selection. She picked seventeen poems, and two were dropped in the wastebasket somewhere. So, the book had fifteen poems. . . . I was to get no money for them. Of course, I wasn't going to take that. I went and bought them myself and sold them at dealer's price. The next time somebody published a book of mine, he wanted a clause in the contract that it was not a good thing to go around and sell things in bar-rooms and such at dealer's price. I said . . . I've got to make some money out of it. And so, that's what I did. . . . There was *Jawbreakers*, and then came the first anthology, *I've Tasted My Blood*. Oh, that was a tremendous printing, as far as my needs were concerned. And I went back and forth from bar-room to printing office, carrying the books in lots of fifty. The staff, the office staff, would wait in the corridors to watch me going past, carrying my own books to sell, and they'd laugh like crazy at this poet who had the nerve to go out and peddle his own books. I'd look at them and say, "Well, look, you know, forty-seven and a half per cent [discount] sounds a lot better than twelve and a half per cent [royalty]." And they'd laugh twice as hard . . .

. . . I went out into the streets and read poetry in public. You see, you weren't supposed to read poetry in public. It was against the law. But I went out into the streets and announced that we'd make an annual poetry day, and the first annual poetry day would be next Sunday. And so it was, Sunday after Sunday, until the police realized that they'd been had. A lawyer was assigned to defend me, and I got off, without it costing me a cent. A lot of fun. Standing up to the cops, and they'd call you "Sir"! I saw a cop, a big, tough fellow, thrusting his way through the crowd. . . . What was I to do? Run? That's what I would have done in ordinary circumstances, but I wasn't going to do it then. He came right up to me, and then, for some reason . . . a crowd of fifty to a hundred people around me all stepped forward. And, I swear, they all stepped forward, left foot first, and pushed me and the cop face to face. What could I do? I grinned at him. He took my name and address and so on. That was the end of the incident.

. . . *In Love and Anger* is very embarrassing. It's not a good book. That was the first one I did, and I know it costs you in the hundreds of dollars. It's a collector's item. What irony! Well, it's about the usual things . . . the soldiers going to war, and damn near getting wiped out, and then, a couple of years later, there's a treaty with Germany. I wrote one [poem] about my little sister, which is quite nice. I wrote one about the preacher . . . how I like drinking and gambling too much to give them up. I could have said "in love and hatred," but hatred's a bit too much, so I said "in love and anger." It's the best line in the book.

. . . *Jawbreakers*! In this book . . . I was going to hit right out and break their bloody jaws. But, of course, there was a lot of interpreting. Everybody got a different interpretation. One said, the very words would break your jaw. Another fellow said it's like those hard candies they used to sell a few years ago. And so it went. That was my best title: it had so many meanings. . . . Irving Layton had written a book before in which he said, in the introduction, these are really poems of a dead man; it's not me, anymore. And I certainly understood what he meant when I looked at that book. So I said the next book that I publish will have a certain amount of prose. I was told that I would never get a regular publisher to agree to that, but eventually that book came out, too. And besides poetry, there was an introduction by Al Purdy. And there was a story called "The Red and Green Pony" and another called "The Legend of the Winged Dingus," and they published it, alright.

I was one of the most famous poetry cases in the history of the country, because the Governor General's prize committee gave the award to another man who was just imitating Yankees and was no good at all. And so, the poets, most of the contemporary poets, gathered together and gave me a prize and called me "The People's Poet." That's where the title came from. . . . about five years after The People's Poet award . . . I got a letter saying, you are to be put on, if you wish, the short list for Governor General's Award winners. You see, the year before, Leonard Cohen had refused it, and I said, you know, my attitude was to refuse money? You think I'm crazy? Well, I went and got the Governor General's Award; my mother went with me. It was great.

A great speech was given in my honour in English and French, and then I went up to the Governor General, and I said, "Governor General, some years ago, when most of the country agreed I should get the award, it was given to someone else. Well, I got an award anyway, and I consider that this Award here . . . confirms the award I got before."

. . . *I've Tasted My Blood* . . . I call the book *I've Tasted My Blood* from the first line . . . from the fact that, as a boy, I was subject to nosebleeds. "I've tasted my blood too much/to love what I was born to." This line does not refer to me particularly, but to my friends. They were having a hard time. I was like the raven: I was a scrounger. I was an incredible scrounger, and I never went for want of pocket money or anything else. My friends that didn't have as much initiative as I did were having a pretty hard time. Anyway, that's what I wrote about. And then I wrote about war. I'd lost many friends in the war. "Playmates? I remember where their skulls roll!" And then, with the line, ". . . many and

many/come up atom by atom/in the worm-casts of Europe." Now, people didn't get that. Again, they asked, what do you mean by that? I said, they're in the earth, aren't they? What comes out of the earth? Worm-casts. But many didn't get it. It was just a lesson on how naïve many of my contemporaries were about poetry.

. . . When the second version of *I've Tasted My Blood* was brought out, there appeared the greatest misprint of all time. It said, "One died hungry, gnawing grey perch-planks." And many and many a teacher was asked, "What was a perch-plank?" And I don't think anyone ever failed to give a definition of a perch-plank. And, all the time, it was a misprint for "porch-plank."

. . . In "What I Know of God Is This," the whippoorwill is used as a synonym for God. We never see God, and yet, we're always hearing His voice. You very rarely see a whippoorwill, but you're almost always hearing a whippoorwill's cry.

. . . I want to be remembered as a kindly man, a just man, a man that could write good verse and who never told a lie. I'd like to be remembered as a good man, a kindly man, a just man, who was nevertheless dangerous when bugged. That's the way I would put it.

I'VE TASTED MY BLOOD

If this brain's over-tempered
consider that the fire was want
and the hammers were fists.
I've tasted my blood too much
to love what I was born to.

But my mother's look
was a field of brown oats, soft-bearded;
her voice rain and air rich with lilacs:
and I loved her too much to like
how she dragged her days like a sled over gravel.

Playmates? I remember where their skulls roll!
One died hungry, gnawing grey porch-planks;
one fell, and landed so hard he splashed;
and many and many
come up atom by atom
in the worm-casts of Europe.

My deep prayer a curse.
My deep prayer the promise that this won't be.
My deep prayer my cunning,
my love, my anger,
and often even my forgiveness
that this won't be and be.
I've tasted my blood too much
to abide what I was born to.

WHAT I KNOW OF GOD IS THIS

What I know of God is this:
That He has hands, for He touches me.
I can testify to nothing else;
Living among many unseen beings
Like the whippoorwill I'm constantly hearing
But was pointed out to me just once.

Last of our hopes when all hope's past
God, never let me call on Thee
Distracting myself from a last chance
Which goes just as quick as it comes;
And I have doubts of Your omnipotence.
All I ask is . . . Keep on existing
Keeping Your hands. Continue to touch me.

I MILTON ACORN

I, Milton Acorn, not at first aware
That was my name and what I knew was life,
Come from an Island to which I've often returned
Looking for peace, and usually found strife.

'til I came to see it was no pocket
In a saint's pants while outside trouble reigned;
And after all my favourite mode
Of weather's been a hurricane.

The spattered colour of the time has marked me
So I'm a man of many appearances;
Have come many times to poetry
And come back to define what was meant.

Often I've been coupled, and often alone
No matter how I try I can't choose
Which it shall be. I've been
Ill-treated, but often marvellously well-used.

What's a man if not put to good use?
Nothing's happened I want to forget.
What's a day without a notable
Event between sunrise and sunset?

My present lover finds me gentle
So gentle I'll be in my boisterous way.
Another one was heard to call me noble.
That didn't stop her from going away.

To be born on a island's to be sure
You are native with a habitat.
Growing up on one's good training
For living in a country, on a planet.

Shall I tell you the soil's red
As a flag? Sand a pink flesh gleam
You could use to tone a precious stone?
All its colours are the colours of dreams.

Perhaps only the colours *I* dream
For I grew under that prismatic sky
Like a banner of many colours
Alternately splashed and washed clean.

The Island's small . . . Every opinion counts.
I'm accustomed to fighting for them.
Lord I thank Thee for the enemies
Who even in childhood, tempered me.

I beg pardon, God, for the insult
Saying You lived and were responsible
. . . a tortuous all-odds-counting manner
Of thinking marks me an Islander.

Evil's been primary, good secondary
In the days I've been boy, youth and man.
I don't look to any rule of pure virtue
But certainly not continuance of this damned . . .

Damned!? Damned did I say? This glorious age
When the ancient rule of classes is hit
And hit again. History's greatest change
Is happening . . . And I'm part of it.

FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DISCUSSION

1. Explain the imagery in the poem "I've Tasted My Blood."
2. With reference to this particular poem, discuss Milton Acorn as a poet of social change.
3. Discuss the poet's use of straightforward, direct language in "What I Know of God is This."
4. Milton Acorn has read his work in the streets and sold it in bars. What do you think of this?
5. Milton Acorn has been called "The People's Poet." Do his poems or his comments suggest that this is an accurate label? Give reasons to support your answer.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Acorn's work has been described as "a poetry of opposites." Read selections from *Dig Up My Heart* and write an essay on the theme of opposites.

RELEVANT WORKS

Acorn, Milton. *In Love and Anger.* Montreal: Author, 1956.

_____. *Jawbreakers.* Toronto: Contact Press, 1963. 54 p. Poems. Fiction.

_____. *I've Tasted My Blood: Poems 1956 to 1968.* Toronto: Ryerson, 1969. Selected and introduced by Al Purdy.

_____. *The Island MEANS Minago.* Toronto: N.C. Press, 1975. 122 p., illus. Winner of a Governor General's Literary Award for Poetry (1975).

_____. *Jackpine Sonnets.* Toronto: Steel Rail Educational Publishing, 1977. 109 p.

_____. *Dig Up My Heart: Selected Poems of Milton Acorn 1952 - 1983.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1983.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Born in Charlottetown, P.E.I., Milton Acorn worked as a carpenter but left the trade in the 1950s to study and write full-time. His first collection of poetry, *In Love and Anger*, was privately published in 1956. This was followed in 1960 by *The Brain's the Target*. The spring, 1963 issue of *The Fiddlehead* featured 58 of his poems. *Jawbreakers* was also published that year. Acorn was named "The People's Poet" in 1970 by a group of Toronto poets when *I've Tasted My Blood: Poems 1956 to 1968*, failed to win a Governor General's Award. *I Shout Love and on Shaving Off His Beard*, and *More Poems for People*, followed in 1971 and 1972 respectively. His further publications are *The Island MEANS Minago* (1975), *Jackpine Sonnets* (1977), *Captain Neal MacDougal and the Naked Goddess* (1982), and *Dig Up My Heart: Selected Poems of Milton Acorn 1952 - 1983* (1983).

A conversation with

EARLE BIRNEY

The genesis of "Vancouver Lights" is rather complicated. I wrote a first draft of this in 1924, when I was twenty years of age and an undergraduate at UBC. At that time, my chief sport was climbing. On the way up the mountain, you'd stop as soon as you got up on the plateau and look down on the lights of Vancouver. And it was terrific. I thought I'd like to write a poem about this. And a lot of images began coming to me, so I put them all down. I was just learning to type properly on UBC's one typewriter. I typed out the poem painfully with a great number of errors . . . and I sent it in to the *Vancouver Province*— my first attempt to publish a thing. And after a suitable interval, I got back my poem, and with it was a letter from the poetry editor of the *Vancouver Province*. It just laid me out . . . something to the effect: "Since you think so little of your effort as to send it to me in this grubby, tangled form, you can surely expect that I will send it back to you at once, and assure you that there's no way in which I will have this published." This set me back for about twenty years.

. . . the poem remained with me from . . . about 1924 to 1941. In 1941 I was not just writing about the lights of Vancouver. I was writing about the possibility of the lights of Vancouver being extinguished forever. I had really moved from being a purely scribbling landscape poet to being somebody obsessed with fear and wanting to rouse other people to the fear. The lights . . . might be going out next month in Vancouver. Who'd turn them on again? Would there be any of us left to turn them on? . . . for the first time in my life I was facing the possibility of the extinction of the human race through its own efforts. Self-destruction.

In the summers I used to go over to Bowen Island a good deal, where a friend of mine had built a wonderful hideout. When I came over one day, there was nobody there, only this thing on one of the tables. It was an examination for Grade Six. It was a question-and-answer kind of thing. The answers weren't there. So I supplied my own. So this is the poem. It's called "Sixth Grade Biology Quiz (answers supplied by a rat)."

. . . [the poem] "fall by Fury" . . . a fall from a tree . . . It didn't take long . . . and all my past life didn't come up, all the questions that people ask of you, you're falling forty feet, do you have time to think? . . . I kept thinking how am I going to get the next branch because branches were near me, but just out of reach. And as I fell, I was trying to grab at these, hoping, at least telling myself, I'll get one of these. I can't fall forty feet, it'll be too much . . . that kind of thing. It was very stupid. I didn't change my religion or lack of religion. I didn't change my politics. Nothing like that happened to me. I just fell forty feet sitting in the air. What I really wanted to write about was the state of mind which led to my falling. The shame which I did feel. I felt ashamed that I had done this. I felt like a mountain climber who had boobed. And that's really what this poem is about.

This is the epithet that I am attaching to the beginning of my last book of poems:

Ave Atque Vale

Over the hill
And sinking fast in the bog
I've just time to wave
One muddy hand.

VANCOUVER LIGHTS

About me the night moonless wimples the mountains
wraps ocean land air and mounting
sucks at the stars The city throbbing below
webs the sable peninsula The golden
strands overleap the seajet by bridge and buoy
vault the shears of the inlet climb the woods
toward me falter and halt Across to the firefly
haze of a ship on the gulf's erased horizon
roll the lambent spokes of a lighthouse

Through the feckless years we have come to the time
when to look on this quilt of lamps is a troubling delight
Welling from Europe's bog through Africa flowing
and Asia drowning the lonely lumes on the oceans
tiding up over Halifax now to this winking
outpost comes flooding the primal ink

On this mountain's brutish forehead with terror of space
I stir of the changeless night and the stark ranges
of nothing pulsing down from beyond and between
the fragile planets We are a spark beleaguered
by darkness this twinkle we make in a corner of emptiness
how shall we utter our fear that the black Experimentress
will never in the range of her microscope find it? Our Phoebus
himself is a bubble that dries on Her slide while the Nubian
wears for an evening's whim a necklace of nebulae

Yet we must speak we the unique glowworms
Out of the waters and rocks of our little world
we conjured these flames hooped these sparks
by our will From blankness and cold we fashioned stars
to our size and signalled Aldebaran
This must we say whoever may be to hear us
if murk devour and none weave again in gossamer:

These rays were ours
we made and unmade them Not the shudder of continents
doused us the moon's passion nor crash of comets
In the fathomless heat of our dwarfdom our dream's combustion
we contrived the power the blast that snuffed us
No one bound Prometheus Himself he chained
and consumed his own bright liver O stranger
Plutonian descendant or beast in the stretching night—
there was light

1941

FALL BY FURY

Now was the season
summer so high and still
the birds in the circling woods
held all the tale

Past deserted nests I rose
through a world of web
severing dropping the black treebones
for the consummation of winter fire
O through the brace and embrace
of a hundred living arms I swung
gathering delight in my own ease
muscle and breath at a play of skill

I was climbing the tall beech
to prune dead limbs
that overhung the summer home
before some gale might hurl
a snag into glass

Each grasp tugged at the old zest
for a climb: the rock-fort a year back
in Sri Lanka and before in my sixties
up the yellow spines of the Olgas . . .
at fifty-eight in cloud on the ribs
of Huayna Picchu . . . at thirty
inching down chalk on Lulworth cliffs
. . . twenty-one and over the icy necks
of the Garibaldis . . . and before that
the mountains of youth . . . Temple . . . Edith
all the climbings made in joy of the sport
and never with hurt
as now to the topmost vault
of the beechtree's leaves I rose
to the flooding memories of childhood
perched in my first treehouse
safe in its green womb

Where brittle branches had threatened
a tunnel of light shone up to me now
as I sat in the secrets of leaf
and smiled on the innocent roof
that hid my love preparing our meal

Shining ahead was the fortnight
given us here alone by our friends
to swim with the small fish in the pond
read and doze in the sun
hide in salal to watch the fox by their den
or to work with hands on wood
and heart on words
rhythms already shaping themselves
in the piney air this first of the mornings

So I threw the last snag down
and the locked saw after
turning and shifting my grips
to descent to Wai-lan
when something my Hubris
some Fury of insect wing and sting
drove its whining hate at my eye
One hand unloosed convulsive to shield
and I slipped
forever from treetops

Caught in a yielding chair of air
I grasped and grasped at a speeding reel
of branches half-seized and wrenched away
by the mastering will of the earth
The next bough surely—
my hard mother
crushed me limp in her stone embrace
stretched me still with the other limbs
laid my cloven hip and thigh
with those I had cleft

And that was a world and two summers ago
yet still in the night I reach
for holds eluding my clutch
till the moment comes when the Furies
relent I catch and cling
swoop alight on a friendly ground
and run again on two good feet
over the grass of dream

Toronto, 1977

TRAWNA TUH BELVUL BY KNAYJIN PSIFIK

(for Ron & Lorna Everson)

Tickets! Wear yuh goan? Tickets! Oshwa? Upta en
upta *en* *fa*ren. Tickets tickets!
Wear you goan Oshwa? Oh *Ot*wa right dare firs coach
Wear yuh goan? Trennon? Upta en
Belleville? Upta en en en yeah Hurry tup . . . .
Awwwwww *bord*! . . . Aw bord . . . . Bore . . . .*Bord*!

Uhmn hunhun Uhmn Ay du dun *Day* duh dun
day duh duh *day* duh duh
WACKITY duh duh WACKITY CLAG CLANG duh duh
WANGDITTY KLONG
duh DUB de dub deDUB de dub de DRUB de DRUB
de WANGITY WACKLEDEE GELACK GELACK
DUB de dub de DUB de dub de didee
Dub de Didee Dub de Didee de didee de dee
past the Guild and blast the mills
and whatta lotta whatta lotta lotta autos lotta autos
o good grayshun land of goshen autos waitin
autos banded by the station for the Go train
on we rush skirting the bluffs swirling the roughs
starling the puffs the smelling the luffs
the luff the lufflee flowers the weeds the flowers
the weeds in the ditch always a ditch
tall with weeds and full of shitch
that fits a ditch but not the flowers
bowers in the whitch? towers of kitsch flowers for rich
KLANITY BANG CANG Can cans in the ditch
no plans for the ditch
log in the ditch dog by the ditch
dog after bitch rogue after tits poles with the ditch
always the poles poles and poles and slow int-oo Whit-
WAKKITY KLANG into what? into Whit into WHIT BEEEEE
Witby! Ay duh dah duh fhnn nmmm
Anyone fer Whitby? Out *this* door
CLANGITY WHAM BonK clumpity bong. . . .
Awwww BORD. . . . *Bord*!

Uhmn Uhmn Ay dahdun DAY duh dun day DAY duh
de died de dee beside the sea beside the LAKE
beside the Lake beside the see teehee
beside the lakesea the sealake and theres a ship
& whats after Whit? apart from a ditch? a scarp on a slake
WALKITY KANG DE DIEDEEAdee de wen de leevy
O when you leave a tittle station and
goo cheevin hoo the nation wen you leaf a leetle patience
and go chuggin thru the marmacans so buggin to
the marmaland go joggin thru the marmalade the BOOOOoo
the bish the bird the bush the bard the bosh
the birch the barm the farm alarm the harm
the barn the barmy farmlands the squirmy wormlands
where there arent so many farmers not a farmhand not a —
dots of oil tanks lots of gravel pots of houses all alike

theres a factory making tractories baking trucks and
faking cars and tracks and lime and making time
may king sweat shirts may king time and grime and dimes
making making making hay
nnnwrOOOOO . . . . oooooo oo de DEB de didy
DUB de did Dud de OSHee dub de OSHAWA! Oshwaaa
Ay de fnnm KLANG ITY bumMM step down. . . .
Boy up Mombaby up

. . . .Awla*bord!*. . . .KLANGITY. . . .Ay de fnnnm de diddle
de drub de drub de WAMGOTY WACKITY
Dob de doe de dub de boe de Boe de BOWMANVILLE
Bowmanville Bowmanville that was Bowmanville
that was Bow-Diddety *dee* ditty *ded* daddy de
KRANG GRANDKIXIG day klasses baby dozes boy doesnt
de kassay de hiss-hissy de kaskastle
bluecattle NEW CASTLE newcastle WAKKITY CLANG
de diddy de diddy de ho de SHUT THAT DOOR de did
SHLANGGG the door the pore and on for more
and more and for pore for port and for whore for Port
PORT HOPE was *Porthope* that wasnt a stop no stop at hope
no hope you dope to port to lope KLAND DE DUPpity
and wheeeee the train goes round the corner
wheee the corner goes round the train
goes BANGLE the trains not round the train has angles
whangles every coach is angled different
angle bangle wrangle seats are jangled sideways dangled
bags jerked bags of the jerks fall in aisles whumph
HWAAAH WAWWAWA baby's waking baby's squawking
stuff him a bottle stiff him a battle stop the blattle
blittle glub glub blissful baby blissful
smallboy jealous ballboy jailsus mauls his ma
FOOOOO! food he wants but Maw is nauseous
offspring sprongs and ransacks baskets biscuits
dippity dup the train is dubbiting huppity slowing
dub-a-dee SCREECH KLANGITY KLANG de KLOE de COE
Coeburg! . . . Coeburgawlabord stepdown KLANGITY
BOMP huroo de boy departs and WAW aw waa de bay
de baby de mom dey all stepdown depart de hooo de ray
abord! Awwww-bord bord

Now we're leaving little Coeburg feeling hungry
for a Joeburg with a WACKETY BONG an ong an ong
and over the lanes and under the cranes and over
the crows the crows in droves and passing the drains
pass-ing . . . the . . . box . . . cars faster afstrrr fastrrr
passing th frrrreights and on in the trrrain
passing daisies oxeye daisies foxeyed crazies
on in our train in the rain and the smoke blowing
flowing slowing and into trendy trammelled TRENNON!
Ay de deb—*Trenton nex* de dub de Trennnnonnn!
KLANGITY thiswayout KLONG BLUmph
stepdow. . . . *Bord*!

Aw de fnnnhm de diddy de hoede WAKITTY BANG
zipping past th poisonivy bending out of wendy Trennon
not so trendy not so friendly Tick-*utts*. . . . Tix please
Wending past the weedy ditches lending eye to randy goat

goat and goatsbeard blueweed white and bindweed blue
once again the curves are angles ANGLE BANGLE
angles trying to be curves curve to jerk and crurk —
girl is trainsick trainsack shamealack shamble retch
and lake again and gulls and kildeer crakes and fens
charming stinkweed stinking mayweed purple vetch
mills and poles o see the fleabane mulleins yarrows
sparrows harrows starlings on the poles on the boles

now were sliding into siding sliding now we're meeting
another train that's passing no it's standing what!
we're passing passingpassing who is what is passing
life is passing life is butta life is buttacuppa
buttacuppas in the ditches cuppa yella butta dream
purple loosestrife yardsan yardsa purpur goosestride
gardensfulls of vetches tufted vetches creamy vetches
mottled vetches wretched thistles bull and thistles sow
thistles nodding thistles scotch and O Can-a-da
our own our native Thistle Thistle? WHISTLE!
slowing now past goats in pasture stoats in stoathouse
BELLL! and houses old red brick and climbing ivy
chickens chickening out from us from *our* bellllLL
clothes fly up on cottage closelines loathlines
boxy flumes with bladder campion foxy plumes of wild
barley lousewort mousewort dandy lions yellow toadflax
yellow cat's ear streets and elms and BELLLL and
BELLVUL! *Belvulnex* swayout De Dub de Dub-bid-dee
whnhmmmm squee-ik Bellllllll-KLANGity KLONG
Stepdown. . . .Hi there Ron, hi Lorna

Ontario, July 1977

SIXTH GRADE BIOLOGY QUIZ
(answers supplied by a rat)

To what order do the rats belong?
To a superior order.
Where do they make their homes?
In shelters underground
below your lethal border.
How are their children born?
From hydrocarbon links like yours
but harder.
What do they eat?
Your world's unguarded larder.
Why are they dangerous to human health?
Because your health is our chief danger.
Have they any use for science?
Yes, we trust in science, rodent science.
Under the lab, the launching pad, the manger
we carry on our underground research
and learn more ways to multiply and wait
till men have cleared themselves
and cats
and left the streets to glare at sky
and there is freedom to preside
below
for rats

Bowen Island, 1961

MY LOVE IS YOUNG

my love is young & i am old
she'll need a new man soon
but still we wake to clip and talk
to laugh as one
to eat and walk
beneath our five-year moon

good moon good sun
that we do love
i pray the world believe me
& never tell me when it's time
that i'm to die
or she's to leave me

Toronto, 1978

FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DISCUSSION

1. Since the 1960s, Birney has deliberately substituted spaces for conventional punctuation, as can be seen in "fall by Fury" and "Vancouver Lights." Why do you suppose he did this?

2. Who is ultimately responsible for the destruction spoken of in "Vancouver Lights"? Who is the "black Experimentress"? Does the poem reveal an optimistic or pessimistic view of the universe?

3. This writer believes that poetry is an oral entertainment suitable for the general public. Why should poetry be heard as well as read?

4. If a poem is to be experienced through the senses, what role does meaning play?

5. *Fall by Fury & Other Makings* is the title of one of Earle Birney's collections. Why do you suppose he refers to his poems as "makings"?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Earle Birney has produced hand-drawn poems, typewriter-concrete poems, and chant poems. These appear, for example, in *Rag and Bone Shop* (1971), *What's So Big About GREEN?* (1973), and *Fall by Fury* (1978). Find out what hand-drawn, typewriter-concrete, and chant poems are. Why would Birney want to create poems like these?

RELEVANT WORKS

Birney, Earle. *Selected Poems 1940 - 1966.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1966. With an introduction by the author.

_____. *Pnomes, Jukollages & other stunzas.* (*Gronk* 3, series 4) Toronto: Ryerson, 1969. Poems.

_____. *The Poems of Earle Birney.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969. 62 p. An inexpensive paperback edition which, as Birney explains in his introduction, most Canadian students will be able to buy. Contains 37 poems, including "David."

_____. *Rag and Bone Shop.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971. 64 p. Poems. Paperback.

_____. *The Cow Jumped Over The Moon: The Writing and Reading of Poetry.* Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston of Canada Limited, 1972. 112 p. Prose.

_____. *What's So Big About GREEN?* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973. 1 vol. 66 p. Poems. Paperback.

_____. *The Collected Poems of Earle Birney.* 2 vols. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975.

_____. *Ghost in the Wheels: Selected Poems.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977. 159 p. Selected and introduced by the author. Paperback.

_____. *Fall by Fury & Other Makings.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978. 96 p. Poems. Paperback.

_____. *One Muddy Hand.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, forthcoming. Contains the poem "Ave Atque Vale," quoted in the conversation.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Born in 1904 in Calgary, Alfred Earle Birney grew up in Alberta and British Columbia. He graduated in 1926 from the University of British Columbia with an Honours Degree in English, completed an M.A. degree at the University of Toronto, undertook further graduate work at the University of California at Berkeley, and finished his doctoral course work at Toronto in 1933. Birney later studied in England.

Birney became a faculty member at the University of Toronto and was the literary editor of *The Canadian Forum* (1938-40). His first poetry collection, *David*, won a Governor General's Literary Award in 1942 as did the collection *Now is time* in 1945. He was editor of *The Canadian Poetry Magazine* from 1946-48, and Professor of Medieval Literature at UBC, where he established Canada's first department of creative writing. Earle Birney has served as writer-in-residence at several Canadian universities.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Birney became interested in visual or "concrete" poetry. Such collections as *Pnomes, Jukollages & other stunzas* (1960), *Rag and Bone Shop* (1971), *What's So Big About GREEN?* (1973), *The Rugging and the Moving Times* (1976), *Alphabeings and Other Seasyours* (1976), and *Fall by Fury & Other Makings* (1978) are characterized by hand-drawn poems, chant poems, and the substitution of space for conventional punctuation marks.

In addition to some nineteen books of poetry, Earle Birney's writings include novels, stories, and autobiographical and non-fiction prose.

A conversation with

GEORGE BOWERING

. . . When I was a kid, I wanted to be a baseball writer. My ambition was to be a journalist, but anybody that does want to do that is also writing other things . . . like trying to learn how to write poems for the school annual. . . . I guess it's because you want to be an artist of some sort, and you're in a small town, and the only art you see is either acting, which I also did, or books in drugstores. You don't see paintings and dance and sculpture. If I had lived somewhere else, in a city, it might have been something else. When I got to college, I had already told people I wanted to be a reporter, and then eventually I told people I wanted to be a writer, and then I started doing it.

I can't remember how I started to write my first poem, but I do remember that my first long poem was a thing I did in Grade Ten. It was forty pages long, and it was about headhunters in Malacca. I've no idea whether there are headhunters in Malacca, but I knew that poetry had to be about exciting stuff. In Keats and those people, it was always exotic, and exotic and poetry somehow seemed related to one another.

. . . When I had gone from the desire to be a journalist to being a writer, what I really wanted to be was a novelist and short story writer. But one also writes other things, and it was easier to publish poetry. When I was twenty-one, other writers were almost all poets, and we started a poetry magazine, and that was it—poetry. People were publishing my poetry, and it took longer for the stories and other fiction to get readers. I've always thought of writing poetry as a way of learning how to write other things more carefully.

. . . Somebody once asked me at a conference in North Vancouver how I felt about audience, and I came upon the notion that I consider myself the audience. And I was listening to language and writing it down. If I really had to say what are the ears that are listening to the poetry after I'm finished with it, they're basically a number of other writers that I know. And I want to write in such a way that they will be impressed.

. . . we were learning to write poems in Vancouver in the sixties . . . a group of maybe eight or ten guys that were around the same age. We were a bunch of people who came, from various parts of the province of British Columbia, down to Vancouver, and we all went to college at the same time. And we all started getting interested in the same poets and wound up creating a magazine called *Tish.* We were instructed . . . to just dig into the place you're in, and find out about it. So it's almost as if we shared the place, Vancouver. It was new to us, and so was learning how to write poetry. So we were exploring both of them at the same time. . . . Frank Davey wrote a whole series of poems about Vancouver and a whole series of poems about Victoria. Another poet was really interested in the relationship between the water and the land, and that's what happens in Vancouver. So place wasn't place in terms of regional; it was just that it was somehow a given that you could rely upon. It was somehow something that wouldn't go away, and it wasn't ephemeral, and it wasn't a matter of opinion. And it wasn't something that you could abstract or make a dialectic from. It was just that you wanted to find out how it worked. And if you go back to those poems, what you'll get is people writing poems about how does this place work.

. . . I feel as if I belong to a tradition, not the whole tradition, and certainly not what some people in eastern Canada would call "the Canadian tradition." I feel as if I am doing a big project, or something like that, that's been going on for hundreds of years. And the poets that have delighted me are the poets that I feel that responsibility to, in terms of what they think the relationship between language and a human being in the world is. . . . Kroetsch, who's just a couple of years older than me, is somebody that is really curious. He started off as a novelist, and then later

emerged in the 1970s as a great poet. And, usually, novelists write really terrible poetry. But Kroetsch came around after all those years of making himself the best novelist in Canada, the most interesting one, and then started publishing books of poems. He published about five books of poems through the seventies. And I totally agree with Frank Davey, who said at a lecture that he gave at McGill University in Montreal that this guy, who's a novelist, started producing poems for us guys, who have been writing poetry for 20 years and saw ourselves in the proper avant-garde in Canada, and he slowed us down and taught us another way to write poetry. And Kroetsch, by his example, and by the things he had to say about poetry . . . I feel really, really indebted to him.

. . . I learned to write poetry on the typewriter. There's an essay by Charles Olson that talks about the wonderfulness of getting directly from your body onto the page by the swift use of the typewriter. And I used to use the typewriter to compose everything—poetry, plays, fiction, essays—the whole works. And in 1970 I started using a pen, and I've been composing things on the pen ever since.

. . . The time I went back to the pen was about the same time I got my first electric typewriter, and I guess I was feeling I needed some kind of slowing down and resistance and contemplation and reflection and so forth while I was writing. Before that, it was like writing straight ahead. And that was happening when I was thinking more about somehow saving images of the world, getting down what happened. Now, I'm not interested in that. I'm only interested in writing. So any relationship between the world and what I'm writing is only incidental. . . . So I needed some kind of resistance, something to slow me down. The pen . . . it's a lot slower writing, and you see the words come out. And you say, "Oh, look at that word. I think I'll write something that goes with that." And away you go. So, you're not in a big hurry.

I have goals as a writer, usually to get the pieces of writing finished. I don't believe that I'll save the world, although that's the intention of any really good writer. Ezra Pound wrote the *Cantos* to save the world, and Walt Whitman wrote "Song of Myself" to save the world, but I don't believe that's really going to happen. One time I said that what I wanted to do when I was writing was to make sure I didn't shame the language. Sounds kind of hoity-toity, but people like it and I like it—that the language doesn't come out worse than it went in, that's basically what I'm interested in. In a sense, a writer is, in some ways, a kind of brake or some kind of insurance against the use of language by advertisers and politicians and people who want to use language as a tool, as something to get their own ends. If there is one poem for every advertising campaign, we're keeping some kind of balance.

I don't like the idea of themes very much, although they're certainly there. This is partly because of a kind of thematic criticism I see happening. School anthologies, for instance, are often called things like *The Northern Experience,* and *The Prairie Experience,* and *Life in a Snowy Country.* You can see that the poems were selected in order to be talking about something else, anthropology or history or something, as if the poems were there as an illustration or a servant of that. . . . I do know that a lot of my writing at times has had to do with making up a version of a life. A lot of personal poems have to do with memory and places where I've lived. I often write about baseball, or imitate baseball in the work. But probably I'm more interested in poetry as language.

The centre of the experience is language. The thing that you are immediately responding to is language. You're not writing a poem in order to discuss suicide or murder or violence, rejuvenation or spring or age. You are interested literally in the sound of that line as compared to the sound of the previous line . . . and what happens to your corpus when you are making such sounds. And so we have all kinds of people, people I associate myself with, folks like bp Nicol, sound poets, who will have a poem that goes "HaaaWheee!" That's the first line of one of his early poems. And in that instance, it would be almost impossible for somebody to say "What is that poem about?" Or "What is the theme of that poem? When you're writing verse, something is happening, and there's a kind of a thrill and excitement, and it sort of blacks out the

whole rest of the world around you. You're always being surprised. Every line comes up and surprises you, and you keep hearing the development of music. You keep hearing the sounds that you're forced to write down, because the poem has been moving in that direction. Usually, when people are talking about themes, they're not talking about themes as they're used in music; they're usually talking about things that you are referring to. Some people call it "content." And you are quite often surprised by the things that the poem refers to. You don't really know how the connections work, and you're delighted by them, but you're usually delighted by them according to the way things sound.

The genesis of "Baseball," according to the beginning of the poem, is that, in the beginning, God made baseball. The poem was written during the baseball season of 1965. It's dedicated to the great American poet Jack Spicer, who told us how to write a serial poem and who was also interested in baseball. He was a San Francisco Giants fan. Some of my critic friends like the poem because it's the first long poem in sections that I published. Jack Spicer died about halfway through that summer, or two-thirds of the way through that summer, in Berkeley, at the age of thirty-nine, and his death begins to enter into the last part of the poem as part of the subject. It's an important poem to me because it's a long poem that is not continuous in a narrative sense . . . doesn't have a set of characters, doesn't have a climax and all that business. All that holds it together is the fact that what's being written about is baseball. It's written in nine sections, i.e., nine innings, and it deals with my childhood memories of baseball being played in Oliver, and big-league baseball, and baseball as a metaphor, and baseball as something cosmic. But, really, the subject of the book is poetry. It reflects on itself. It has a lot to say about how one makes poetry. So the love for baseball is a disguised way of talking about a love for poetry.

It was bp Nichol who asked me about it [publishing "Baseball"], and I guess he heard me read part of it. He, at that time, was running a small press called—oh, it had a lot of different names—Gronk and so forth. I sent the poem to him, and he was going to publish it, and I think this was about 1967. And then Coach House Press started up, and I didn't know that bp was related to Coach House. I'd heard a little about Coach House, but it hadn't really made much of an impression. Later on, Coach House was to become *the* literary press in Canada, as it still is. And eventually the book came out, and it came out as a Coach House book. Because bp took it over there and had it done as a Coach House book and, in those days, they were really excited about the technology, as they still are. They were printing all kinds of books . . . books that had blue ink on pink paper and so forth. What they did with this one was, well, when it's closed, it's in the form of a pennant, and the cover is green felt. It both resembles a pennant and that sort of felt stuff that pennants are made of, and the grass that you play ball on. And then, when you open the book, instead of a pennant, it becomes a kind of a braided diamond, and it has little markings on the corner of the page indicating that we're dealing with a diamond here. So, it's a case of form and content, the medium being the message.

"Desert Elm" is one of my favourite poems. . . . "Desert Elm" comes in the middle of a period when I'm writing poems that are of some length. There are two or three poems from those years that are forty-eight or thirty-six sections long. When I started "Desert Elm", I had no idea how long it was going to be. It turned out to be nine sections long. I really thought it was going to be longer, but a time comes when the poem itself declares that it's finished. And you, as the audience, say, okay, that's it. But one curious thing about it is that somebody had noticed that I don't mention colors in my poems, partly because I think that's descriptive, and description is an act that I'm not very fond of. So I decided to write a poem that had to do with colors.

Although the poem is about my father and the South Okanagan valley—the desert elm being the elm tree, the Siberian elms that grow around Oliver—it's really about colors, and it meditates on blue and green and red and white. And it plays. It picks up on a color and just starts going with it. Noticing, for instance, that the Okanagan valley is

blue. . . . So "Desert Elm" meditates on that, but it works the way that a lot of my long poems work. I think I'm writing about something else. . . . I usually set up a baffle. In that one, the baffle was colors. In another one, I wrote a poem about the Tarot pack, and I thought I was writing about those cards. I always set up some kind of baffle, and then I pay so much attention to that, that whatever the poem is really about can come up. So, I knew I was going to write about colors in that poem, and then the story of my father came up. And that's my favourite way to work, and one of the reasons why that's one of my favourite poems. I hate poetry that expresses what the poet thinks about things. And one of the ways not to do that is to set up some kind of system that you think you're writing to, like a poem that uses all the letters of the alphabet, one stanza A, one stanza B, and so forth. Pretend you're working on that, pay so much attention to it that you can't express how you feel about things, and then the real story will emerge in the poem.

What advice would I give to aspiring poets? Well, I would take the two pieces of advice that I was given when I was younger, and reverse them. I was told, "Find your own voice" and "Write about what you know." I would say, do whatever you can to get away from your own voice. Listen to the voice that the poem has itself, so it won't be you making up a poem about your kvetches and expressing yourself. And try to write about something you don't know, try to discover something that you learn through the writing of a poem. If you start writing about what you know, basically you're going to write the same thing that somebody else wrote, because they wrote about what they know, and what you know and what they know is the same thing.

I'm looking forward to the time when we do something in poetry such as the music people have done with rock videos. I think it's about time we started making poetry videos. We'll have all kinds of non sequiturs go on. There'll be one scene where a guy is lying on a ratty old bed with these nice lights slanting across his face, and then something will come through the wall. And then there'll be a shot of him standing up there reading a poem, and then he'll be zooming with a motorcycle down through a field where a bunch of umbrellas are sticking up out of the ground. And we'll give them away as promos to the television stations, and there it'll be—poetry video.

You heard it last, here.

from **A POEM FOR HIGH SCHOOL ANTHOLOGIES**

This will be serious, literature,
& Canadian, you'll have to look out for
the author's intentions, & also
his tricks, his puns, his jokes, the things
he is doing to make it
difficult
& hence worthwhile. Right?

Pay attention. You might be askt:
what is the most vivid figure of speech
in this selection? Just remember this:

The ivory wings of the white bird
fell off & woke the sleeping maiden
who gently lifted her feet
from the oven, piping hot!

Now you may ask yourself, what
does that symbolize, & as a matter of fact
why does the author say what
at the end of the line?

Oh, I forgot.
George Bowering was born in
Princeton, British Columbia,
December 1st, 1939, the son of
a high school Latin teacher.

There are various references to the student in
this poem.
Why do you think the author keeps coming back
to that subject?

What do you think his attitude to the student is?
Pick out key words & phrases that
drive his point home.

from **BASEBALL, a poem in the magic number 9 (for Jack Spicer)**

9.

Long shadows
fall across the infield
in the ninth inning.
Sometimes ball players
look like they're dying
as they walk off the field
in the dusk.

I knew an old man in San Francisco
came to life
when the Dodgers were in town.
Now he is dead, too,
& Jack is dead,

& the soldiers play baseball
in Asia,
where there is no season,
no season's end.

"It's just a game,"
I used to be told,
"It isnt whether you win or lose,
but how you
play the game."
In baseball
that is how you say
the meek shall inherit
the earth.

September 30, 1965,
Willy Mays has 51 home runs,
gray hair
at his temples,
he says he has been
getting tired
for six years.

I know I feel my own body
wearing down,
my eyes watch
that white ball
coming to life.
Abner Doubleday
lived in the nineteenth century,
he is dead,
but next spring
the swing of a
35 ounce bat
is going to flash with sunlight,
& I will be a year
older.

My nose was broken twice
by baseballs.
My body depends on the game.
My eyes
see it now on television.
No chicken wire—
it is the aging process.
The season
can't help but measure.

I want to say only
that it is not a
diversion of the intelligence,
a man breathes differently
after rounding the bag,
history, is there such a thing,
does not
choose, it waits & watches,
the game
isnt over till the last man's
out.

THE FLYING DREAM

The word from my hand follows the release of my eye from the dream of my release from the ground but just. Growing up is knowing all the evils of the world & failings of all people

will not be corrected before the end of my life.

I was two & I was three & I was nearly four. I was one with the ground. I was too good to be true, I was free of the earth, I was for

correcting all the evils of the world & I would never die, I would never begin dying. I flew standing up, maybe six inches from the sidewalk. I could never get higher but I could fly. I flew in the attitude of Jesus standing on the water or above all on the mount of olives, Jesus I thought I was. I began to think I was a super man or Jesus because I could not be ordinary or what was the use of being here inside my mind instead of out there where they all were? In my dreams I never met anyone flying toward me. I never grew all the way up, for later I thought I was a poet, I had to be a poet or what was the use of learning words & being inside my skull rather than out there where they all are.

THE BRUSH FIRE

I conceived my love for nature when I burned the hillside & this I did before I began school. The name of the town was Greenwood & when I returned a few years later the hill was green. I feared a spanking when I came home but received none & then I conceived my love for my parents.

The hillside burned, it burned faster than I could walk to step on the fire. Every step was on the blackened earth I was learning to love. I conceived my love for nature when I saw it burning faster than the men could get shovels into the earth.

The name of the town was Greenwood & the war was on, where cities burned in their cement. What held the hill together beneath the flames I did not know but I learned love for it & saw those men joined to the hill & my shame. That I could cause such peril while there was a war on.

I ran home & waited for the punishing hand while God allowed fire in the cities across the sea. It never came & when I went back a few years later the hill was covered with green wood while the nearby hills were brown & the war was over, & I loved it.

from **DESERT ELM**

from **Section VIII**

My eyes are brown, walking inside them
would be moving over burned grass on low
hills. They found a desert & made it bloom.
I move closer, zooming into his eyes &
find the first aperture completely filled
with one petal of a blue flower, a close-
up of a star weeping in surrender to the
earth, a tear, Aurora weeping helplessly
on the edge of the Blue Nile.

from **Section IX**

Men who love wisdom should acquaint them-
selves with a great many particulars.
Cutting the crisp apple with a French knife
I saw that the worm had lived in the core
& chewed his way out, something I've seen
a thousand times & never understood & while
I'm looking he's on the other side of the
green tree picking. One two one two, the
wisdom of the tree filling his picking bag,
its weight strapt over his shoulders. He
showed me, you cross the straps like this
& keep it high. Get above the apples & look
down at them.

& I still do it wrong, reaching up, pick-
ing with sore arms, strain rather than wis-
dom filling me not the bag. He said the
safest step on the ladder is the top, he
was trying to get me up, & always right,
this one I have learned & Saturday I was
on the top step picking apples, wanting
someone to advise. That is how one becomes
acquainted, working to gather.

FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DISCUSSION

1. As the poet explains, "Baseball" was published in the shape of a pennant, with a cover of green felt. When open, the book is in the shape of a diamond. Why might it be published in this format?

2. Of "Desert Elm," Bowering remarks "I knew I was going to write about colors in that poem, and then the story of my father came up. And that's my favorite way to work, and one of the reasons why that's one of my favorite poems. I hate poetry that expresses what the poet thinks about things." How would you describe the process of writing "Desert Elm"?

   Is writing partly an unconscious act for this writer?

   Can a poem ever *not* express what the poet thinks about things?

3. Read the poem "The Brush Fire" and note the way that it is arranged on the page. What makes this writing poetry, not prose?

4. Note the lack of adjectives and metaphors in the poem "The Flying Dream." Why would Bowering choose to avoid using them? What effect does this have on the reader?

5. According to George Bowering, "The centre of the experience is language. The thing that you are responding to is language immediately. You're not writing a poem in order to discuss suicide or murder or violence or rejuvenation or spring or age. You are interested literally in the sound of that line as compared to the sound of the previous line. . . ." What is more important, the sound or the content of a poem?

   If the sound were changed, would this also change the meaning?

   Does Bowering's poetry have content?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. About "Baseball," Bowering says "It's an important poem to me because it's a long poem that is not continuous in a narrative sense." Read the poem (not just the excerpt). If it does not tell a story, what holds it together?

2. Compare the poem "Baseball" with Robert Kroetsch's "Seed Catalogue." Are they similar in their use of structure?

   Why would Bowering count Kroetsch as a poet who influenced him?

3. Compare Bowering with bp Nichol. How are these two poets similar? different?

RELEVANT WORKS

Bowering, George. *Rocky Mountain Foot; a lyric, a memoir*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968. 127 p. Poems.

_____. *The Gangs of Kosmos*. Toronto: Anansi, 1969. 64 p. Poems. *Rocky Mountain Foot* and *The Gangs of Kosmos*, together, won a Governor General's Literary Award for Poetry (1969).

_____. *Touch: selected poems 1960 - 1970*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971. 128 p. With an introduction by the author.

_____. *The Catch*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976. 128 p. Poems.

_____. *Poem and other Baseballs*. 2nd ed. Coatsworth, Ont.: Black Moss Press, 1976. 44 p. Poems.

_____. *Another Mouth*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1979. 96 p. Poems. Paperback.

_____. *Particular accidents: selected poems*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1980. 155 p. Edited with an introduction by Robin Blaser. Paperback.

_____. *West Window: the selected poetry of George Bowering*. Don Mills, Ont.: General Publishing, 1982. 144 p. With an introduction by Sheila Watson. Paperback (Spectrum poetry series).

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Born in 1939 in the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia, George Bowering was educated at UBC, where he received a B.A. in 1960 (History) and an M.A. (English) in 1963. In the 1960s, Bowering, together with Frank Davey and other poets, founded *Tish* magazine. It was eventually unofficially replaced by *The Georgia Straight Writing Supplement*, but the first 19 issues were published by Talonbooks as *Tish* 1-19 (1973). Since the appearance of his first poetry collection, *Sticks and Stones*, in 1963, as a Tishbook, Bowering has published some 40 books. His writings include poetry, short stories, a novella, and two novels. In 1980, *Burning Water*, a novel about George Vancouver's search for the Northwest Passage, won a Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction.

George Bowering currently teaches at Simon Fraser University.

A conversation with

ANNE CAMERON

I think I was around eleven years old, and . . . there were stories where I really didn't like the endings, and I started rewriting other people's endings. And then, I had a notebook and, around the age of eleven, I started writing, and I have done it ever since.

. . . It seems like everywhere you are, there's always somebody who just bought a pencil and found a piece of paper, and they smooth out the piece of paper, and they chew a point at the end of a pencil, and they say, "I am a writer." And they come out with dumb things like, "One of these days, when I have a space of my own and an independent income, and I know the subject, and I have my head in shape, and I have a little bit of time, and I find a schedule, and I can get a little bit of discipline, I'm going to write a book, and I'm going to become rich and I'm going to become very, very famous." And I just get this urge to grab them . . . because everybody expects that, if you want to play the piano, you work two hours a day from the time you're six until the time you're twenty-six, but they think because they have a pencil, they're writers. And it just doesn't work that way. You work, two, three, four, five hours a day for years and years and years, and everybody tells you that you're crazy. And they say things like, "But what are you going to do to feed yourself?" And you say, 'I want to be a writer." You're told you have to have a trade, you have to have a job. Nobody says "No, you're not going to be a concert pianist, you're never going to be a brain surgeon," but the whole family freaks out when you say you're going to be a writer. . . .

I think my writing for theatre was an accident. I had practically no knowledge of theatre, no background in theatre. I probably hadn't seen much of anything except for these dreadful, fifth-rate Shakespearean companies that used to wander around the small towns of British Columbia, putting on performances during which everybody sleeps, chews gum, tells dirty jokes, whatever. And I was writing poetry. I was writing a lot of angry poetry, and I was writing for a little newspaper in Vancouver called *The Indian Voice* . . . the editors of the paper took a number of these poems and put them together, and they worked . . . it was just an accident. They entered it in the British Columbia Centennial Playwriting Competition, Special Category, and it took first prize, and for about three years, I wandered around saying, "What happened, what happened?"

And then, . . . the theatre piece got produced, and it was incredibly successful and received a standing ovation at the Art Gallery. And people expected that Cameron is going to write for theatre. So, I had to run out and pay $7.42 for this pocketbook with a red-and-blue cover that said *The Structure and Theory of Playwriting,* and none of it made any sense. What is this? What is this? And I did, I think, four plays, and I really wish they would take them out of these anthologies. I wish they would take them out and bury them somewhere. They're terrible. They're horrible. I didn't know what I was doing, as God is my witness. I apologize. They're ghastly. And they keep reprinting them, and people phone and say, "Can we put on this?" and I say, "Would you mail it back and I'll rewrite it? I'll rewrite it free." . . . And I think they're ghastly. They're really awful. The only one that I really like is the first one that I did by accident, *Windigo,* and the last one, *Rites of Passage,* which has never been finished. Which is maybe why I like it.

About fifteen years ago, it seemed like a time to start doing something rather than run around screaming the sky is falling and nothing is working. And we formed Tillicum Theatre. We took a bunch of kids . . . kids who, in most cases, had failed remedial reading, had not been doing well in school at all. Most of them were Indian, part Indian, and we formed a theatre company. And everybody said, "It will never work; you can't do it." I had long thought one of the reasons that kids in general, and Native kids in particular, have

very low reading skills is because nobody has ever given them anything to read which interested them in the slightest. And anything that they did find interesting, they were told was no good; there was no culture in that. It was terrible. And we gave them things that they did want to read, publications that told them things, and we said, "Okay, prove we're wrong." . . . The kids were unaware of a whole pile of things. If you don't know where you're coming from, you can't possibly have any ideas where you're going to.

. . . The very best books on Native culture, on Native philosophy, said that they were non-verbal people. They [the books] are telling the teachers that these are very shy children and they don't speak up; and don't turn the spotlight of attention on them because then they'll never answer. . . . Look . . . listen to what Chief Joseph had to say, listen to the speeches of Crowfoot. These are not non-verbal people. And then, we got them reading speeches, and we got them acting the speeches, and then we told them, go out there and cut loose with the speeches. They blew people right out of their seats. And they also blew themselves out of their apathy. And out of all the kids that were involved in Tillicum Theatre, not one of them is in jail. Not one of them is an alcoholic. Not one of them has got a drug problem. . . . Some of them are working as actors. Some of them are working as artists. Some of them are working in music. They are all doing very, very well. And they can all read really, really well.

. . . I was born on Vancouver Island, and you can't live on the Island and not be part of it. An incredible and large part of the Island is Native culture. And I liked it. . . . When I first started collecting stories, I made a point of not taking a tape recorder. Not only because a lot of places didn't have electricity to run it, and not only because I'm so ham-fisted I probably would have broken it, but because, with the exception possibly of professional actors, if you push a microphone in a person's face, you can watch them go mute. And I never believed that they were giving the stories to me. They were sharing them, but that didn't make them my stories. They belong to the people who tell them. They belong to the people who've guarded them for thousands of years.

At first, I did nothing with the stories other than be very glad that I had heard them and try to incorporate them into my own life, because there's an incredible amount of really wonderful living skills in those stories. And then, people started telling me that they were giving me the story. . . . And when they gave me the story, they meant that I could use it. I could tell it. I could write it. I could incorporate it into my work. And then, a couple of years ago, I was told that some of the women wanted a book to be written. They told me what they wanted in the book. At that point, I felt that I owed them. I had an obligation.

In my stories, Granny was a real person. Granny probably still is a real person somewhere, probably a number of real persons. I've been really fortunate in that I've met a lot of very old women, not all of whom were Native, who were just so glad that someone would hear what they had to say. And I think it's really a shame that so few people are listening. The anthropologist and the ethnologist, and I don't know what other kind of "ologists," go wandering out; they talk to some of the men, and they record. . . . They don't listen to the women. They don't stop to think that every story has a male version and a female version. That it got told forty-six different ways. Suddenly, they've taken an oral tradition and locked it into stone and nothing can change. And nobody's listening. They're just recording. They're not listening. And one of the beautiful things about the oral tradition of the West Coast people is that you are supposed to listen to what is being said, and you are supposed to feel what is being said. You're not supposed to record it and think, that's it forever, amen.

Granny, Granny in all her guises, has always been very glad that suddenly someone showed up without a pen, without a pencil, without a paper, without a tape recorder, without anything except some very hungry ears, and sat down and just listened to what she was saying. And, in some cases, it has been really, really sad to know that that woman actually has a dozen granddaughters, none of whom

were listening. And, in one case, a woman had waited for years for one of her grandchildren to come to listen to her stories. And none of them came. So, she told them to me. And that's really sad. Those kids were watching television, . . . and they weren't listening to what their grandmother had to say. And there are some people now who object to the fact that a non-Indian is telling Indian stories. My answer to that is, where were you before these old women died? Why weren't you listening to them? Why did it have to be me? Where were that woman's dozen grandchildren?

Sometimes, I adapt a story to fit modern conditions. *Dreamspeaker* is adapted, and yet *Dreamspeaker* is true to the original philosophy. There are things in *Dreamspeaker* that I believe. I do believe that it is impossible for a person to hear a sound that is not there. If a person hears a sound, then the sound had to have been there. And for years, they've been telling people, people that they said were schizophrenic, that they said were mentally ill, that they were hearing things that didn't exist. Well, if it doesn't exist, you can't hear it. Now, there's a man from England who does autopsies on the brains of schizophrenics, and he has discovered that they have twice as many sensory receptors as non-schizophrenics, which basically means they are seeing and hearing in quadraphonic instead of in stereo. And the sounds that they heard were there. It was just that other people were crippled and couldn't hear them. In *Dreamspeaker*, there was a kid that they said was crazy because he heard things they couldn't hear, and he saw things they couldn't see. And there was no time in the Native culture that that kid would have been made to feel like a freak. They might not have understood—I'm sure they didn't know that there were twice as many sensory receptors—but they knew, quite simply and basically, that you cannot hear what is not there.

There are other things that I have presented exactly as they were given to me. Immediately, some of the anthropologists will ask "Did I use the exact choice of words?," and the answer to that is "No." Very often, the people who were telling me these stories didn't have the vocabulary that could convey the poetry and the beauty of that story. Why does it have to stay in broken English, and in dialect and restricted vocabulary? I could listen to them tell the story in Nootka—which I don't speak—but I could hear that there was a rhythm, there was a poetry. You could hear the waves. You could see trees with the wind blowing through them. . . . And I don't translate; I'm a storyteller. I had been given a story. They gave it to me. I can juggle it, if I want. And so, I try to put it in context. It was poetic. It was beautiful. It was dramatic. It was gripping, and I tried to do that in the language of the invader.

My skin's white, and I don't know what that signifies one way or the other. I truly do believe that all people are the same. We all get hungry . . . being white is not special. Being black is not special. At the same time, I have a deep respect for culture which doesn't necessarily have to do with the color of the skin. . . . The tradition that I feel really a part of is the oral tradition. . . . People are always telling me that the oral tradition is dead. They also tell me that the Indian culture is dead. They keep telling me that all these things are dead, yet I keep seeing these things in evidence, all over everywhere.

I find it very funny that the people that are running around saying that the oral tradition is dead don't want to accept the fact that George Clutesi has been alive and well for more years than most of us. And he's still telling stories. And can still get an audience. He can get an audience on a ferry. He can get an audience on a bus. He can get an audience in an auditorium telling a story, but they tell me the oral tradition is dead. . . . Jack Hodgins has taken the oral tradition and siphoned it through a typewriter and does wonderful things. . . . I think that that magic realism is done most well by writers from the West Coast. And I think that magic realism is the oral tradition. Where, how you tell the story, is just as important as the story you are trying to tell. That's what I'm trying to do. I think that we've spent too long wandering around being taught that the British literary tradition is the thing. Everybody forgets that the British literary tradition grew out of the oral tradition, people sitting around, telling lies around a campfire.

. . . I became a feminist at the moment of birth. Actually, I became a feminist at the moment of conception. I wound up being female. And, if you are female, and if you have a brain, and if you will insist on using it, you can't help being a feminist. . . . It colors my work a beautiful shade of lavender. Yes, I think it colors my entire life. . . . It works against me because some of my best stuff has not been, and probably never will be, published in my lifetime. I don't believe that I was born to be a walking incubator. I don't believe that I was born to be a second-class citizen.

. . . Sometimes, it's sorrowful to think that your best work is sitting in a box. But writers work in a vacuum, anyway. Everybody is so excited about things that I have forgotten about. I mean, we still have this anthology with this absolutely dreadful play [of mine] floating around being inflicted on every school kid in Canada. And I did that so long ago that, thank heavens, I don't remember it.

Every story, every idea, has its own shape. It comes in its own shape. A poem is a poem from the very beginning. It couldn't be anything else. I couldn't work it any other way. And some of the stories that I'm working on now will only work as stories. They will not work for television. They will not work for film. They will definitely not work on stage. They are stories; they are prose. I have tried to adapt one stage play to film, and it didn't work. It was a stage play. And, I think that *Dreamspeaker* is an exception, because it works as a novel and as a film. I don't know why that is. It came as both things at the same time.

I'm working on a magic-realism novel entitled *Women and Children and Huckleberry Wine.* It's a collection of lies about some women who take a gill net into outer space. I'm working on *Petroglyph Eyes*, which I will probably never finish because I keep re-writing the last quarter of it. And, I'm working on an adaptation of Maria Campbell's autobiography *Half Breed,* for film.

[As a screenwriter] I see things in sequences. I have a little projector, a little screen in my head, and the film runs there. The difficult part about writing the film script is getting the fingers working fast enough on the typewriter so you can get that film on paper before it disappears. And sometimes, when I'm working on a film script, I work two or three days without sleeping because I have to get it down. If I lose it, it is lost. . . .

The legend of Sisiutl is the centre of . . . the collection of stories, *Daughters of Copper Woman.* It was the centre of the faith that the Native women certainly had, and it's something that I think we have to learn. There's nothing that is going to do you in any faster than your own fear. If you take a look at things that you're afraid of, and stop being afraid of them, then there's no limit to what you can do. You just have to stop being afraid. People might laugh; they might do almost anything at all. The world could end tomorrow. This isn't the only world, and the worst thing that could happen to you in this world is that you die. And that's why you were born.

SISIUTL

There are some people that think that only people
have emotions like pride, fear, and joy,
but those who know will tell you
all things are alive . . .

There are trees on the coast stripped of bark, stark silver white, and without the bark one can see how the very wood is twisted so the dead tree seems to be like a corkscrew rooted in the earth. There are people who think that only people have emotions like pride, fear, and joy, but those who know will tell you all things are alive, perhaps not in the same way we are alive, but each in its own way, as should be, for we are not all the same. And though different from us in shape and life span, different in Time and Knowing, yet are trees alive. And rocks. And water. And all know emotion.

There are rocks on the coast which, like the trees, seem corkscrewed, seem to twist upon themselves, as if in agony. Whirlpools and riptides are the same, only different. All because they have seen Sisiutl and tried to flee.

Sisiutl, the fearsome monster of the sea. Sisiutl who sees from front and back. Sisiutl the soul searcher. Sisiutl whose familiars are often known as Stlalacum, the vision people, those who ride on the wind and bring dreams, the Stlalacum who search out the chosen and those who would see beyond the externals.

Sisiutl moves freely in water whether salt or fresh, even in heavy rain, for he is able to transform himself. He seeks those who cannot control their fear, who do not have a Truth.

Fearful he is and terrifying. His eyes send cold fire into your belly and his forked serpent tongue flashes horror at your soul. No words could explain Sisiutl, who looks like a snake, but has no tail, rather a head at both ends, each head more fearsome than the other, and from him emanates cold and horror.

When you see Sisiutl you must stand and face him. Face the horror. Face the fear. If you break faith with what you Know, if you try to flee, Sisiutl will blow with both mouths at once and you will begin to spin. Not rooted in the earth as are the trees and rocks, not eternal as are the tides and currents, your corkscrew spinning will cause you to leave the earth, to wander forever, a lost soul, and your voice will be heard in the screaming winds of first autumn, sobbing, pleading, begging for release. Lost, no part of the Stlalacum who know Truth, no part of anything, alone, and lonely, and lost forever.

The bark flew from the frightened trees leaving only the twisted wood exposed. Only the roots, deep in the earth, kept the trees from falling upward into the void.

When you see Sisiutl the terrifying, though you be frightened; stand firm. There is no shame in being frightened, only a fool would not be afraid of Sisiutl the horror. Stand firm, and if you know protective words, say them. First one head, then the other, will rise from the water. Closer. Closer. Coming for your face, the ugly heads, closer, and the stench from the devouring mouths, and the cold, and the terror. Stand firm. Before the twin mouths of Sisiutl can fasten on your face and steal your soul, each head must turn towards you. When this happens, Sisiutl will see his own face.

Who sees the other half of Self, sees Truth.

Sisiutl spends eternity in search of Truth. In search of those who know Truth. When he sees his own face, his own other face, when he looks into his own eyes, he has found Truth.

He will bless you with magic, he will go, and your Truth will be yours forever. Though at times it may be tested, even weakened, the magic of Sisiutl, his blessing, is that your Truth will endure.

And the sweet Stlalacum will visit you often, reminding you your Truth will be found behind your own eyes.

And you will not be Alone again.

from **HOW RAVEN FREED THE MOON**

And Raven put Moon in her beak and flew up the smokehole in the roof.

"Caw, caw, caw!" Raven laughed. "It's mine, all mine." She flew south, toward her home, with Moon in her beak.

Through the night, which was lighted by the Moon in her beak and no longer pitch black; Raven flew swiftly over trees and meadows, rivers and streams.

But Moon is not a pebble off the beach. Moon is not a huckleberry. Moon is very large and very heavy.

Soon Raven could no longer fly with Moon in her beak. She was too tired. She was so tired she almost dropped Moon into the ocean waves.

Raven knew she would never make it over the mountains with Moon in her beak.

So Raven tossed the Moon up, up, up into the sky as high as she could and Moon caught on a corner of a cloud.

So high did Moon go and so brightly did it light up the sky that the old fisherwoman and her daughter saw it in their land far to the north.

"Look!" said the daughter, "look up there in the sky . . . "

"That's our Moon," said the fisherwoman.

Her mother smiled, and shrugged. "But look at it," she said. "Moon looks much better up in the sky than it ever looked in that box."

FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DISCUSSION

1. Anne Cameron says of "Sisiutl" that the story is the "centre" of the collection entitled *Daughters of Copper Woman,* the centre of the faith of the Ahousat women. What is this story about? What is the central belief that is so important?

2. The writer maintains that "Every story, every idea, has its own shape. It comes in its own shape. A poem is a poem from the very beginning. It couldn't be anything else." Can a short story be "translated" into a poem, or vice versa? Or would the new form create something entirely different?

   What, then, is the relationship between content and form in writing?

3. "There are some people now who object to the fact that a non-Indian is telling Indian stories." Do you think it is possible for a non-Native to portray Native people or their beliefs accurately in a short story?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Find a story that is part of the oral tradition of your district or region. Write it in the form of a short story. How does the story change when it is written?

RELEVANT WORKS

Cameron, Anne. *Windigo.* (unpublished), 1967. Collection of Indian poems, presented as a play. Winner of the British Columbia Centennial Writing Competition. Written under the name of Cam Hubert.

_____. *Rites of Passage.* (unpublished), 1975. First produced by the New Play Centre, 1975. Winner of the New Play Centre's Playwriting Competition, 1975. Written under the name of Cam Hubert.

_____. *Dreamspeaker.* Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1978. 137 p. Fiction. Includes also "Tem Eyos Ki and the Land Claims Question." First written as a film script, *Dreamspeaker* was produced by CBC-TV in 1977 under the direction of Claude Jutra and won six Etrog Awards, including one for script. Re-written as a novel in 1977, it won the Gibson Literary Award in 1978. Written under the name of Cam Hubert.

_____. *Daughters of Copper Woman.* Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1981. 150 p. Legends of Pacific Northwest Indians.

_____. *How Raven Freed The Moon.* Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour Publishing, 1985. 30 p., illus.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Born Barbara Anne Cameron in 1938 in Nanaimo, B.C., the author changed her name to Cam Hubert upon marrying Jacques Hubert. With his help, she has raised two dozen foster children, in addition to their own three children. She founded Tillicum Theatre for Native youth in the 1960s. Tillicum produced her first play, *The Twin Sinks of Allan Sammy*, in 1971. Her next plays, *We're All Here Except Mike Casey's Horse* (1973) and *Echoes of Other Things* (1974), were workshopped by the New Play Centre, Vancouver, in 1975. Later, in *The Trouble With the Women's Movement Is It Has No Sense of Humour At All* (1976), she satirizes women's lib, while in *A Matter of Choice* (1977) she explores the crime of rape. A television script about drug abuse called *They're Buying Up the Streets* (1977) won an ACTRA award in 1979, and *The Homecoming* was produced by CBC-TV the same year. Although much of her work has been written under the name Cam Hubert, Anne Cameron has reverted to her maiden name. She now has five children, since she cares for an adopted daughter and a step-daughter, and writes "I have rabbits, chickens, ducks, a couple of dogs, a Manx tom and a four-color female cat, and my current ambition is to acquire a pair of Chinese brown geese. I am a feminist; I am anti-nuke; I detest all politicians regardless of party, and have been writing since I was 11 years of age. If I had my life to live over, I would be a country-and-western singer, instead!!!"

A conversation with

ROCH CARRIER

I was born in the province of Québec, in a small village in a rural area exactly 63 miles from Québec City going south, near the American border. And it was a very tiny village. The population was always less than 2,000 souls, as they would say. And the priest will always ask the ladies, the men, sure, to do their effort because he wants to cross that 2,000-souls border. So this is the place where I come from.

We were seven children in our home. My father was a salesman. He was travelling in the area from parish to parish, selling everything he could buy and buying everything he could sell. So he would buy a cow and sell it for a horse and buy again that cow. So it was quite an incredible commerce he was living from. He was not a reader. The only thing that would interest him was what we call editorial in the *journal*. (That was the place where the editor would speak his mind.) And at this time, he was reading *L'Action Catholique,* which was a very Catholic journal done mostly by priests. And he would read the editorial about communism. . . . My mother was a school teacher. They [teachers] knew a little bit more about writing. And many, many years later, I was quite moved by discovering a book in which she would write down poems that she probably learned by heart. . . . I am the only writer in the family, the black sheep, so this is me. . . .

We were a poor parish and poor background, so the library was poor. . . . I had uncles who would go to Québec City. That was a city that was very far from my village. Even if it was sixty-some miles, but it was very far. And my uncles would come back from the vacation, and in their suitcases they would have books. And then I discovered novels and discovered what we call in French *contes.* It would be something like tales. And then I had something to feed myself for the summertime.

I was fifteen. I was writing my first poems about the springtime, about the trees, about how it was to be a young man lost in the world. At this time, I was sure those poems were the greatest ever written in the world. Every day I was sending by mail those poems to the papers, to the magazines in Montreál, because I was the biggest writer of the century and it had to be known. So my pocket money was all going into stamps to ask those publishers to publish my poems. In fact, they were writing, rejecting them.

The first thing that was published was a short story. I noticed that finally my poems were not poems. They were telling a story, and it was the beginning of my short-story writing. It's not easy to begin in that career because there are many writers. You have to fight, and if you come from my background, you have to fight more. And I was sending those short stories to a newspaper, which was published in Montreál at that time. It was *La Patrie.* And they were rejecting my short stories one after the other and one after the other. But there was that great writer who very often had a story published. I was reading it and I was telling myself that's not as good as my stuff. One day, instead of writing at the bottom of the story "Roch Carrier," which is my name, I wrote the name of this big writer. The story was published, and this was my beginning. This was my real beginning in *La Patrie.*

After the primary school, the priest in our parish noticed that I was a nice, young, eleven-year-old fellow, so he probably thought this is somebody who would become a good priest. And he had a meeting with my mother. My father was in this commerce finding, looking for the money, but my mother was the one who was taking care of the things at home. So the priest had a meeting with my mother, and they decided that I would go to the college, a new college in Boles, thirty miles from my village. I went there for five years, I think. And after Boles, I knew I would not become a priest. I wanted to become a writer and, to become a writer, I had to become a very bad guy. I was reading very bad books, all classical

books, but they were not permitted by our Mother, the Church, and our Father, the Pope, so I was thrown out from the college and I found myself in New Brunswick. I spent two years in New Brunswick. It was a good experience because it was taking me out from Québec. And after that, it was Montréal. And after that, La Sorbonne in Paris. And Iran. . . .

When I begin to write, I don't know where I'm going. Just as, at the beginning of a road, I just don't know where I will go. But I'm just finding word after word. It's exactly like, I would say, walking in the woods and you have to go and find and find, and it's only at the end that you have the whole landscape, the whole sight of the landscape. . . .

My main debt, I would say, I owe to the men from my village who would get together at the end of the day and tell stories. And I owe a great deal to my father, who was a kind of reporter. He was travelling outside from the village. He was spending a long period of time, I would say a whole week, sometimes two weeks, outside from the village. And then he would come back and know that the man living in the grey house had hanged himself because he was in despair, and he will tell that the cow, the three-colored cow, was having babies. So he was telling the novel, the news, but he was telling it in a very special way that everybody was listening to him. Everybody was telling stories, and I owe them a great deal. They teach me how to tell a story as much as any great writer. And I remember my father would begin a story full of details describing everything and putting his story in place, and suddenly he would pull out his waistwatch from his pocket. He would look at the time and would say, "Oh, I'm sorry, my wife is waiting supper for me," stopping the story and putting back the watch in the pocket. He would tell the sequel of the story after the supper. It was a good technique. I know how to do a chapter from that.

Living in Québec has affected my writing by the kind of French we speak in Québec. I can write, let's say a French French, but I can also write the way we speak in Québec. Even when I write French French I like to put in something of the color of the French we have in Québec. And it's important to me. It's part of my identity. And it affected my writing because the experience of being a child, after that a man, living in Québec, gave me a very special point of view. And by my background I have no inheritance at all, so I am like the first one. I am the beginner. Before me, my family, except my mother, did not know how to write, did not know how to read. So . . . I am the first one to see. And it gives me something. Suddenly I am afraid of all that is new, but at the same time it's a great experience to be the first. I'm discovering the moon on the earth every moment. So it's great, and it's great for my writing, and I owe it to my living in Québec. . . .

I never suffer from writer's block. Probably people who don't like my novels should wish so, but no, I never. But, to be sincere, between two books there is a kind of black hole. To me, it is not very long, but it's quite difficult to live. You just finish a book, you know you did your best, and now what's next? And there is that feeling which is very deep, and suddenly it's difficult to stand. And I know that during that period of time, it's difficult also for people who are living with me. It's difficult to live because I'm difficult to stand. They know now what's happening and they know it will not last very, very long. During that period of time, now I try to find new projects, let's say a tour of Canada to promote a book, or something like this, so I don't have the feeling that it's over. So I forget a little bit, and suddenly I'll be able to get involved in a new project. . . .

I've written some plays. In fact, one of them was presented in Toronto. I like to alternate a novel and a play. I wrote a certain number of plays. Frankly, I prefer the novel. But after the novel, I am looking for something else, let's say to be fresh, to get I would say clean again, and to make a new start. Why do I like writing a novel? It's probably because I like to tell a story, and I still have this belief that a novel is a good story. And I am fascinated by the storytellers. I was, as a kid, fascinated by the storytellers, and for me the greatest novelist is a storyteller. There is the art of storytelling—when to begin the story, when to start it, when to forget

something and to bring it back a little bit later. So that's part of the work, of the craftsmanship. And I love that, and I enjoy it. And when I write, even if I'm alone, at the corner of my small table, I feel that somebody's listening to or reading the story as far as I'm writing it. And when it's good, I know this person feels good, and when it's no good I feel that the electrical contact, the electrical wire, is broken.

I dream of doing a big work, and I dream that every book would be a stone of the building. So probably from book to book you will find not the same thing, but the themes would occur, and I will develop the theme in a special way in every book. But, as a man, I am, can we say, maturing? I am maturing and I'm learning more, and probably my themes are less and less superficial. If I speak about, let's say love, I know more about it.

If I have a special theme, yes, probably this is the theme of the small against the big, something like this. In my first books, there is that theme of the minority, French-Canadian minority, against the majority, so this is the small against the big. If I think about my last book, *Lady with Chains,* again, it's the small man and the small woman who are struggling against the strength of probably God, good and bad. So this is probably my main theme. But, the more and more I go, the more and more things are complicated. In *Lady with Chains,* I tried to do like in music, to have the theme and to exploit the theme and develop the theme, and add other things to the main theme. So this is it. This is part of the work enriching itself as it goes.

The story at the beginning of *Lady with Chains* was a story I had heard as a kid. It was dealing with a baby lost in the snow, in a snowstorm. At the time, the story impressed me a lot because that baby who suffered a lot, who became cold like ice, could have been myself. And my mother was saying, "Pay attention, don't get lost, don't go playing in the snowstorm, you will get lost." So it's a fight for life. Many years later, I am still thinking about that story. I could have told the story from the point of view of the baby's, and in fact I began that way. It was not easy because a baby cannot talk a lot, cannot express a lot himself, so it was impossible to do. And I began to wonder if the point of view is the point of view of the man, and I began to work on that hypothesis.

And there are, in Québec literature, a lot of books telling about those brave settlers who go cut trees. They are strong. They smell badly. So this was not really interesting to me. Their story had already been told. And then there was the woman. For myself, what about the story from the point of view of the woman? And there are not many books written in French Québec about the woman who was having that experience of the settler. And it was not an easy job. It was very, very difficult. The environment was very, very tough. The work was very tough. They had to be strong. Their loneliness was terrible. And by their education their soul was full of frightening things, frightened feelings. They were afraid of everything. God was there in the sky, but behind the tree there was the Devil. And I began to work on that.

I told the story from the point of view of the woman: what it was for a woman to quit her family and go, by the standards of that time, very far in the woods. She had to do the work of a man—cut the trees, pull out the stumps, take care of the animals, and spend very long days alone in the log cabin. So I told that story. The more I was telling the story, the more I was thinking of all those generations of women who did that work. And there was suddenly a link between this woman and a very old lady in the past, and there is a kind of reincarnation, because Virginie, the main character, believes she was somebody coming from very far in the past. But it's only one theme. There is another theme which is a theme of love. And I tried to study, to see and to live the love as it is, a very strange phenomenon. There seemed to be a very narrow wall between love and hate, and this is at the core of the book: what is between love and hate. And this character [Virginie] goes from one, to the other, to the first one. So this is about the *Lady with Chains.*

I had to do research to know how people were working at that time. What kind of stove they had in the cabin, what they would

put between the trees, the logs of the cabin, when they would travel . . . what food they would have, what kind of tools they would have. I had to do research for that. But to speak or to write from the point of view of the woman, it was not really difficult for me. I was trained by reading, a lot of reading, and one of these writers who wrote those great readings was [Gustave] Flaubert. Flaubert speaks about one day of writing, and he wrote on that day that a lady goes in the woods on a horse to meet her love, and, Flaubert wrote, today, I was a horse, a man, a woman, and a leaf from the autumn tree. So a writer has to be all that. And if I am a writer, I must write from the point of view of a woman, horse, forest, autumn leaf. (I could write from the point of view of a microphone, if you want.) Everything is living, and the writer has to forget he's a man or woman and go into that thing to express itself.

This monastery in the book is not my invention. It was part of the history. When I think about those monks who in reality were coming from Belgium . . . can you imagine that, coming from Belgium, crossing the sea and coming to the woods in St. Justin? It's unbelievable, and probably one day I will write a novel about this, because they were certainly great men, believing in God. They were extraordinary men. From the point of view of the characters of my novel, they are not really men because of that robe. They are not really men because they don't belong to the real life. The real life is cutting trees, pulling up stumps, taking care of the animals, having a wife, making children. That's the real life. And those monks in the monastery are not real men. So the feeling of my character, the man, for those monks, is quite empathetic. And the man doesn't like to see his wife going to speak to those monks. He doesn't like it at all, because they say things he would prefer them not to say.

If I have a goal I would like to do a good book, a book that many people read, and a book that the children of those people would read, too. If I have a goal, this is my goal.

THE HOCKEY SWEATER

The winters of my childhood were long, long seasons. We lived in three places—the school, the church and the skating-rink—but our real life was on the skating-rink. Real battles were won on the skating-rink. Real strength appeared on the skating-rink. The real leaders showed themselves on the skating-rink. School was a sort of punishment. Parents always want to punish children and school is their most natural way of punishing us. However, school was also a quiet place where we could prepare for the next hockey game, lay out our next strategies. As for church, we found there the tranquillity of God: there we forgot school and dreamed about the next hockey game. Through our daydreams it might happen that we would recite a prayer: we would ask God to help us play as well as Maurice Richard.

We all wore the same uniform as he, the red, white and blue uniform of the Montreal Canadiens, the best hockey team in the world; we all combed our hair in the same style as Maurice Richard, and to keep it in place we used a sort of glue—a great deal of glue. We laced our skates like Maurice Richard, we taped our sticks like Maurice Richard. We cut all his pictures out of the papers. Truly, we knew everything about him.

On the ice, when the referee blew his whistle the two teams would rush at the puck; we were five Maurice Richards taking it away from five other Maurice Richards; we were ten players, all of us wearing with the same blazing enthusiasm the uniform of the Montreal Canadiens. On our backs, we all wore the famous number 9.

One day, my Montreal Canadiens sweater had become too small; then it got torn and had holes in it. My mother said: 'If you wear that old sweater people are going to think we're poor!' Then she did what she did whenever we needed new clothes. She started to leaf through the catalogue the Eaton company sent us in the mail every year. My mother was proud. She didn't want to buy our clothes at the general store; the only things that were good enough for us were the latest styles from Eaton's catalogue. My mother didn't like the order forms included with the catalogue; they were written in English and she didn't understand a word of it. To order my hockey sweater, she did as she usually did; she took out her writing paper and wrote in her gentle schoolteacher's hand: 'Cher Monsieur Eaton, Would you be kind enough to send me a Canadiens' sweater for my son who is ten years old and a little too tall for his age and Docteur Robitaille thinks he's a little too thin? I'm sending you three dollars and please send me what's left if there's anything left. I hope your wrapping will be better than last time.'

Monsieur Eaton was quick to answer my mother's letter. Two weeks later we received the sweater. That day I had one of the greatest disappointments of my life! I would even say that on that day I experienced a very great sorrow. Instead of the red, white and blue Montreal Canadiens sweater, Monsieur Eaton had sent us a blue and white sweater with a maple leaf on the front—the sweater of the Toronto Maple Leafs. I'd always worn the red, white and blue Montreal Canadiens sweater; all my friends wore the red, white and blue sweater; never had anyone in my village ever worn the Toronto sweater, never had we even seen a Toronto Maple Leafs sweater. Besides, the Toronto team was regularly trounced by the triumphant Canadiens. With tears in my eyes, I found the strength to say:

'I'll never wear that uniform.'

'My boy, first you're going to try it on! If you make up your mind about things before you try, my boy, you won't go very far in this life.'

My mother had pulled the blue and white Toronto Maple Leafs sweater over my shoulders and already my arms were inside the sleeves. She pulled the sweater down and carefully smoothed all the creases in the abominable maple leaf on which, right in the middle of my chest, were written the words 'Toronto Maple Leafs.' I wept.

'I'll never wear it.'

'Why not? This sweater fits you . . . like a glove.'

'Maurice Richard would never put it on his back.'

'You aren't Maurice Richard. Anyway, it isn't what's on your back that counts, it's what you've got inside your head.'

'You'll never put it in my head to wear a Toronto Maple Leafs sweater.'

My mother sighed in despair and explained to me:

'If you don't keep this sweater which fits you perfectly, I'll have to write to Monsieur Eaton and explain that you don't want to wear the Toronto sweater. Monsieur Eaton's an *Anglais*; he'll be insulted because he likes the Maple Leafs. And if he's insulted do you think he'll be in a hurry to answer us? Spring will be here and you won't have played a single game, just because you didn't want to wear that perfectly nice blue sweater.'

So I was obliged to wear the Maple Leafs sweater. When I arrived on the rink, all the Maurice Richards in red, white and blue came up, one by one, to take a look. When the referee blew his whistle I went to take my usual position. The captain came and warned me I'd be better to stay on the forward line. A few minutes later the second line was called; I jumped onto the ice. The Maple Leafs sweater weighed on my shoulders like a mountain. The captain came and told me to wait; he'd need me later, on defense. By the third period I still hadn't played; one of the defensemen was hit in the nose with a stick and it was bleeding. I jumped on the ice: my moment had come! The referee blew his whistle; he gave me a penalty. He claimed I'd jumped on the ice when there were already five players. That was too much! It was unfair! It was persecution! It was because of my blue sweater! I struck my stick against the ice so hard it broke. Relieved, I bent down to pick up the debris. As I straightened up I saw the young vicar, on skates, before me.

'My child,' he said, 'just because you're wearing a new Toronto Maple Leafs sweater unlike the others, it doesn't mean you're going to make the laws around here. A proper young man doesn't lose his temper. Now take off your skates and go to the church and ask God to forgive you.'

Wearing my Maple Leafs sweater I went to the church, where I prayed to God; I asked him to send, as quickly as possible, moths that would eat up my Toronto Maple Leafs sweater.

from **LADY WITH CHAINS**

"If you wanted, Virginie, we could have a child, but only if you wanted. It's natural to have a child. When a man and woman are together they shouldn't stay alone, children should spring up around them like beautiful flowers from the good Lord that later will become little men and little women, who will continue life and cause more little men and women to flower. That's the law of life, Virginie. The good Lord wants life to continue. You mustn't stop life. A man and a woman mustn't live together as if they didn't know God's law, or as if God didn't exist. Making children is the reason the good Lord put men and women on this earth; if the good Lord hadn't wanted children He'd have covered the earth with bears and oxen and cows . . . . Virginie, if the good Lord had wanted only stones on the earth, He'd have created nothing but stones. There's one law in this life: it says that a man and woman should make children. Well then, you and me, we're a man and a woman, so why don't you want to make a child together? We could do it now, in the spring, the end of winter, and the child would come at the start of next winter. Virginie, we could make the child today, because I'm not going out in that storm. We could make a child right now! I've put dry wood on the fire. While the fire crackles and makes pretty sparks, you and I could be obeying God's law. I won't always be able to do all the work to enlarge our land, I'll need strong arms to help me. And this land, once she's been cleared and she's like a fine fat pregnant woman, and once my arms give out on me, well then I'd like to have a child I could hand myself over to, and you too, and our land. You need children to pass on your life to; otherwise why are we on this earth? I know that you're thinking about a child too. You're a woman, Virginie, and a woman, like a man, hasn't many things to think about besides a child. You're thinking about a child who's behind us, in the snow of time past, while I'm thinking of a child who's waiting for us somewhere in the snow of time to come. We lost a child. Do you think that all the children of the bears or all the children of the wolves or all the children of the birds live long enough to make children? Do you think that all the children who are born can live out their lives to the end? The good Lord made the law. In His law, many children have to die. That's because the good Lord wants us to make even more children. I wouldn't want us just to stand there looking at our tragedy, the way you'd look at a well that seems to be getting drier and drier. We have to continue along our way. We must make a child to take our revenge on the great winds sent by the good Lord. You must cry, Virginie, because losing a child is sad. It's like dying a little yourself; it's a bit of your own life that dies. You must cry because death is sad. No one ought to die. Especially not children, and most of all not small children who haven't yet known the happiness of running in the summer sun, under the good Lord's great skies. It's sad, but it's the good Lord's law that children die as often as old people. The good Lord who created the earth and who makes winters and summers, must know what He's doing, but me, I . . . "

. . . . . .

She rises. That man goes on sleeping, as if night still held sway. The wooden hinges creak. That man mustn't be awakened. She opens the door, as little as possible. She is naked. That man must not be awakened. She runs in the forest. Beneath her feet she feels neither pebbles nor twigs nor thorns. This morning the birds

do not sing. She knows where she is going. Close to the forest, devil's bread grows. "Those mushrooms are deadly poison; you mustn't touch them; they're devil's bread." Near the woods which that man hasn't yet attacked grows enough bread for the devil to eat his fill for a long time. The good Lord wants her to dispense justice. And now the devil will help her. Can she touch these lethal plants without danger? Their caps are the color of glowing coals. Devil's bread resembles devil's fire. The mushrooms are covered with disgusting warts. The devil's skin must be like that. She must look a long time for the devil's bread. When at last she has found it, scattered around the outskirts of the forest like the remains of loaves multiplied not by God as in the Bible, but by the devil, she wants to know if it contains the deadly poison. She bends down and rubs it on the silver ring she has worn since her wedding day. The ring turns black. The good Lord, who has sown all about them animals and plants that they could eat, has also allowed the devil to distribute his poison food. She will dispense justice. Briskly, she kneels and pulls up some mushrooms. She already has an armful which she holds against her breasts. It feels cool. She is bearing death. How soft it feels, the death that she carries on her breast! She tries to run, for she must return before that man awakens. Grass wet with dew tangles around her legs, holding her back. It feels as cold as snow. She hurries. Why is she thinking of snow when the sun's fire is burning the sky? She pushes the door. Creaking. The man shakes himself and turns on the mattress. If he catches sight of her with the devil's bread, he won't want to eat what her hands have touched. She tosses the devil's bread in a pot and covers it. He opens his eyes. The light that comes in the door is hurting them. He shuts them for a moment, then gets up. Without speaking, he arranges dry wood in the stove, shreds some birchbark, lights it and, when the fire has caught, he takes the buckets to the stream. He is going to draw the water that will kill him. He returns, singing, wet: he has rolled in the cool water. She pours some water into the kettle, then into the pot with the mushrooms, and a little bowl where she has put buckwheat flour.

"What a sleep, Virginie! I haven't slept like that for ages. Some nights I come home so worn out I can feel my body behind me at the end of a rope, like a horse that refuses to move: even on nights like that I don't sleep like I slept last night. Virginie, I slept like the dead. I tell you, a man who slept the way I did can't still be alive."

Virginie dresses briskly. That man shouldn't have seen her naked. In the pot the mushrooms are boiling. Gray scum is raising the lid. She spreads buckwheat batter on the metal plate of the stove.

"I'll make you some chicory coffee too, for your journey. I'll pour it in a bottle. Once you've travelled a good distance, find a tree with thick roots, and sit and rest your back against the tree and drink the coffee. Then you won't feel tired anymore."

Did he notice that she was speaking? He eats his buckwheat pancake with syrup from the maples he tapped that spring. Virginie's hand doesn't tremble as she pours the poisoned water into the bottle. She adds two handfuls of chicory, then pushes in the wooden stopper. She places the bottle in the heavy canvas sack along with a blanket, the axe, the wire for making snares. That man is so happy he feels like dancing.

FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DISCUSSION

1. Roch Carrier writes "The Hockey Sweater" from the point of view of a man looking back on his childhood. Is he successful in conveying how the child felt at the time?

2. Why does the hockey sweater have so much significance for the boy? For the man?

3. The author says that a special theme is found in his books: that of the "small against the big," the minority against the majority. Is this a theme in "The Hockey Sweater"?

4. In the excerpt from *Lady with Chains*, what do you think of the man's attempt to persuade Virginie to "make a child"? Is his intention friendly or manipulative?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. In the novel, *Lady with Chains,* Virginie remembers a past lifetime. How does this memory influence her personality and actions?

2. Virginie attempts to kill her husband. Why? Does her husband deserve this punishment?

3. Of *Lady with Chains,* Roch Carrier says, "There seemed to be a very narrow wall between love and hate, and this is at the core of the book: what is between love and hate. And this character [Virginie] goes from one, to the other, to the first one."

   Write an essay about love and hate as depicted in this novel.

4. Write an essay on how the theme of "small against big" is developed in *Lady with Chains.*

RELEVANT WORKS

Carrier, Roch. *The Hockey Sweater and other stories.* Translated by Sheila Fischman. Toronto: Anansi, 1979. 160 p. Translation of *Les enfants du bonhomme dans la lune* (1979).

_____. *Lady With Chains.* Translated by Sheila Fischman. Toronto: Anansi, 1984. A novel. Paperback. Translation of *La dame qui avait des chaînes aux chevilles* (1981).

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Born in 1937 in Sainte-Justine-de-Dorchester, Québec, Roch Carrier was educated at the Université de Montreál and the Sorbonne, where he completed his doctorate. He presently teaches literature at the Collège Militaire St-Jean.

Carrier's first book, a collection of tales called *Jolis deuils*, was published in 1964, and won the Prix de la Province du Québec. This was followed by the novels *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* (1968: trans. 1979); *Floralie où est-tu?* (1969: trans. *Floralie, where are you?*, 1971), and *Il est par là le soleil* (1970: trans. *Is it the sun, Philibert?*, 1972). *La Guerre* was adapted for the stage and, in 1972, was the first Québec play to be produced in translation at the Stratford Festival in Ontario. Five more novels followed: *Le deux-millième étage* (1973: trans. *They won't demolish me!*, 1974); *Le jardin des délices* (1975: trans. *The Garden of Delights*, 1978); *Il n'y a pas de pays sans grand-père* (1979: trans. *No country without grandfathers*, 1981); *Les fleurs vivent-elles ailleurs que sur la terre* (1980), and *La dame qui avait des chaînes aux chevilles* (1981: trans. *Lady With Chains*, 1983). Carrier published a collection of short stories, *Les enfants du bonhomme dans la lune* (trans. *The Hockey Sweater and other stories*) in 1979.

A conversation with

FRED COGSWELL

My childhood was a very good one . . . my mother and father, my sister and I . . . we had a 200-acre farm to roam around in, and school was just across the road. We were both quite good at it. The work that we had to do was hard, but we didn't know that it was supposed to be hard. It was what you had to do; you got used to it; you did it. I used to go out all summer in my bare feet. Everybody went in their bare feet as soon as winter was over, and your feet got tough. Also, you didn't have flyspray and things like that. Now, whenever I go anywhere, the mosquitoes and blackflies will bother other people, and if they do sting me, I have sufficient immunity that it doesn't bother me in the least. . . .

At the school, everything was primitive. We used a slate, and the way to clean the slate was to spit on it and rub it with your hand. We were terribly unhygienic, and we all thrived as though there were no such thing as disease in the world. When one went to high school, it was two and a half miles away. Most of the time, I either walked or ran. Sometimes, I ran over in the evening and played basketball for an hour or two and then ran back again. In those days, one had plenty of energy. In later grades, I used to stop school in the wintertime. In December, at about three o'clock, my father and I would go to the woodlot, and there we would saw down trees. But basically my school was not interrupted by anything. My mother very much wanted me to go to school and to go to school to get off the farm. I really didn't care.

. . . Outside of work, I read books. The books were just as real to me as anything else. I read whatever I could get my hands on. In the school library were Dent's *Celebrated Speeches, The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World* by Creasy, a copy of *Spring Haven*, and the *Imperial Dictionary*. I read all of those very carefully and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the *Vision of Pier's Plowman* in modern English done in Dent's [Everyman's] Library. Then I read all the books at home and all the books I could get my hands on. At Christmas, you got up about four in the morning and read your book (which was your Christmas present) by seven. You'd had your Christmas by breakfast, the way that worked out. When I went to high school, it was a treat because the high school library had all the works of [Charles] Dickens and [Alexandre] Dumas and Sir Walter Scott. I sort of galloped through all of these. So, reading was one thing. Another thing was athletics. I usually played team games. I played baseball and softball and basketball. Basketball was perhaps my best game. I was more of a defensive than an offensive player. And in addition to that, I collected butterflies and moths. I spent a great deal of time at this particular hobby. One of our schoolteachers got me to do it. For several months at a time, she lent me a moth book and a butterfly book which I couldn't afford to buy. Later on, when I was a student in Edinburgh, I bought both books even though I had no more need for them.

. . . There was no Canadian literature in the high school library. There was Canadian literature in the textbooks. I particularly remember [one volume of] Charles G.D. Roberts' animal stories, published by Dent, which was on, I think, the Grade Eight curriculum. And I read it, and I was baffled by some things like the invisible powers of nature. I asked the hired man, and he didn't know what they were any more than I did.

. . . When I was in high school, I decided to try to write poetry. At that time, we were taking *Palgrave's Golden Treasury, Book II*, and I liked the poems in it. I tried to write poems like those poems—using the same kind of forms, the same kind of ideas—but putting my own words to it. And, as time went on, I kept doing that with various other people that I had read. Ultimately, I learned that poetry didn't come from the outside like that, but from the inside, and that it found its own form from what was inside you. But, this was not wasted time—the years I had spent doing this. It's like a person who has practised on a silent piano keyboard for years and suddenly

discovers that there is something called music. He, at least, knows where to put his fingers.

. . . I am a traditionalist really. . . . I realize that everything which we have in a cultural way in the present, we owe to the past. Each generation stands on the shoulders of each generation. We are different, but in that particular difference we utilize our past. And we add to, and we subtract from, and we change as generation follows generation like a kind of procession. If you walk off the procession—forget everything that has been done before you, and forget history, culture and all that sort of thing—you are reducing yourself to the same position as the other animals who do not have the gift of literacy. Like the great apes. And you have to start all over again. And to me, that kind of thing is a very great folly.

. . . I didn't so much initiate the magazine *Fiddlehead,* as I changed its direction. From 1945 until 1952, it had been a house organ for the members of the Bliss Carman Poetry Society. But, during the course of that time, the members scattered to various parts of the world. Some of them had dried up poetically, and it was difficult to get material for the magazine. At the same time that this happened, a magazine on the west coast, *Contemporary Verse* (which was the only other independent magazine of poetry in Canada), quit publishing, so I decided to change the nature of *Fiddlehead*. We printed it. We opened it up to contributors from all over the world, and from 1952 to the present day we have published in that manner.

. . . One of the chief dangers for a poet is to get to be quite good at something. You cannot be good at anything until it becomes a habit. Once it has become a habit, however, it is almost impossible for you to deviate from it, so you may be caught in a particular habit of putting words together in a certain way. And as long as you do that, you can't put them together in any other way, and there are all kinds of possibilities that you're missing out on. You have to consciously, continually attempt to try things which you aren't good at in order to get out of your particular habit. If you look, for example, at the careers of, shall we say, Irving Layton and Al Purdy and Raymond Souster, you will see that all of them became caught in a certain thing which they did well. Ultimately that became, before too long, almost a parody of what their earlier work was. Somebody like [Earle] Birney was resolute and determined to try everything new that came along and try to break out from ever letting his work become habitual.

. . . One of the themes [in my poetry] has been the difficulty, if not impossibility, of communication—the relative isolation of any particular individual. We communicate at certain levels, but to go beyond that is extremely difficult.

. . . In terms of most human experience, I suppose I communicate with people about as well as anybody does. But in terms of a kind of ideal communication, I feel that, given words . . . we can't seem to do it. In other words, the real problem in communication lies in that we use symbols that have a kind of generally agreed meaning. But although there's an agreed meaning, there's not the same value placed upon each word by other individuals that we place upon the same word. Consequently, the communication is always rough and ready.

. . . All poets may or may not succeed in the view of people in the world, but they almost always fail in the view of what they think is their total capacity. They usually find reasons for that failure, but I think the failure is inevitable. It lies in the limitations of words to express life. Words are static; life is dynamic, continually changing and much more intense than any words can be. Poems are consequently only a kind of halfway house to the real thing.

. . . Occasionally, one gets what one might call an epiphany or a certain kind of light where the difference between you and the universe seems to disappear, and you're kind of lost and at one in it. I should not say lost. You just simply are part of it, and it's a wonderful feeling—the kind of feeling I suppose that one tries for through communication in words.

. . . "The Butterfly" is a very personal poem. It is quite literally true. I'm Ben. The aunt was feeble-minded. She was beginning to get cataracts, which is why you have "her clouded eye." But the clouded eye is also a

cyanide jar, and so there is a kind of depth. The "wingéd thing in pain" is the butterfly. It is also love or Eros in the last two lines. She had caught this butterfly (I don't know how; I think on the window), tied it up, put it in a jar, and made me a present of it. When I saw it, I was so disgusted with the look of it that I did not take the present in the spirit in which it was given. I was very, very sorry afterwards, and I suppose this poem became a rather belated act of atonement. "New Brunswick's style" is doing what has been traditionally done in a district among the young people for generations. They would gather; they would play certain games; they would sing hymns; they would play certain old songs. They did not go in for butterfly collecting. Butterfly collecting belonged, if it belonged anywhere, to the kind of hobby of a rich eccentric.

. . . I wrote "Circular Saws" from the memory of an incident that happened to me in December, 1939. I was taking away wood from a circular saw and my hand got caught and pulled onto the saw. It sliced one fingernail off very neatly and did no more damage. I did not feel a thing at that moment, but about five minutes afterward, it began to hurt like anything, and I had to stop work for the day. Later, I remembered it, and I thought that this would make quite a good extended metaphor for the kind of things which happen in life, and the kind of things which we inflict on other people as well.

. . . When I first saw the rockpile, it looked much bigger. I think I was smaller, which is why. Also, the rocks were heaped up over the main big rock much more than they are today, and I wondered how in the world it ever got there. I ultimately concluded that it had always been there, and that the other rocks had been piled around it. . . . I imagined [in the poem "The Rockpile"] the kind of man who would have tried bullheadedly to move it, couldn't, and then, of course, covered it up. I imagined a rather ironic sequel to it, when people who came along afterwards took it that he had put that one [the big rock] there, too.

In *The Stunted Strong* [a group of sonnets including "Valley-Folk"], I contrast the fields, which are in patterns and which are limiting, with the river and with the seagull, which beckons to a more unpatterned way of life. And, in the final sonnet, I point out, also, the difficulty of outgrowing, or going beyond, the particular soil and climate in which you were raised.

The poem "How It Was" . . . what happened was that my daughter Carmen died of cancer. Her husband sent us her ashes to be buried, and we took them and buried them with my mother and father's grave. She had always been happy when she went up there as a girl, and she had loved them very much, and they had loved her. And so we buried the ashes there, and we put her name on the back of the tombstone, and the dates of her birth and death. And the strange thing was, I noticed how beautiful the country was, as I was driving up, and I think I caught that in the description in the first part of the sonnet. And, although I did not hear any bird sing, when I finished putting the sod over the ashes, it was as though I had been liberated and was freed from some great weight. Suddenly, the thing was done. It was over, and I could notice the things around me that I hadn't been noticing before—as though there was no longer any tension or no longer any need for sorrow. So, I used a bird as a kind of correlative for that feeling.

"When Time Has Closed My Coffin-Lid" . . . this is an epigram. An epigram is a short poem of two or four lines in which you usually have a snap surprise at the end—witty or startling. And the poem is, in a sense, recognition of the fact that, if and when I get so that I can't do the things that I do, I will at least be thankful that I had a chance to do them. Because I have enjoyed myself in my own particular ways. And the last line—"Thank God I did them while I could"—is a kind of surprise. You are set up for something else and you get that surprise in the fourth line, which gives the poem its particular punch. It also tells you something about me as a person.

. . . I think that I should be remembered more as a translator than as an original writer. But, as a writer, I would like to be remembered as someone who gave, as near as he possibly could, a kind of honest expression to what meant a great deal to him in his lifetime and in his living.

NEW BRUNSWICK

Before it takes the air in greener shoots
A seed is nurtured by surrounding soil
And patterned by whatever streams can coil
Where worms and borers worked their slow pursuits;
And though it wills to grow a crown that fruits
In skies where lightnings break and thunders clap,
It can't escape the source that feeds its sap:
No tree belies its soil, outgrows its roots.

Not soft the soil where we took root together;
It grew not giants but the stunted strong,
Toughened by suns and bleak wintry weather
To grow up slow and to endure for long;
We have not gained to any breadth or length,
And all our beauty is our stubborn strength.

THE BUTTERFLY

Young Ben with net and jar would run a mile
To catch a brand-new butterfly to add
To his collection; neighbours thought him mad—
Hobbies like his are not New Brunswick's style.

One day when Ben came back from useless chase
His feeble-minded aunt who'd watched him run
Gave him, bursting with pride for what she'd done,
A bag of crumpled paper tied with lace.

Impatiently he tore away the string
And found a common Cabbage Butterfly
Too spent to move a rubbed and tattered wing.
He crushed it in his hand in quick disdain.
Too late he saw a wingéd thing in pain
Die in the round jar of her clouded eye.

THE ROCK PILE

Right in the middle of a field there stands
A huge rockpile, but most of it is one
Big stone, a lump of rock that weighs a ton
Or more, too much for horses or for hands
To budge, and there the man who cleared those lands,
Jim Armstrong, in the days of brawn and grit,
Wrestled for weeks in vain to lever it;
It broke his harness, traces, grappling bands.

And so Jim covered up with little stones
The only thing in life he could not beat;
But when new settlers came after a while
To look and praise in awed, admiring tones
The mighty rockpile in his field, he'd smile
A twisted smile and find the credit sweet.

CIRCULAR SAWS

When the circular saw
chewed up my fingernail
I said to myself
"This is a bad dream
and I shall wake up"
but I didn't
and in a few minutes
the pain began

after that, I had
a scar to remind me
not to go near
circular saws

But I soon found
they had ways
of disguising themselves
so that watch as I might
they were always
hurting me

now inside and out
I am covered with scars
but that is not
the worst I've learned
the worst thing is
that under the masks
I wear and without
intending to be
I am a circular saw

HOW IT WAS

The road we travelled was the usual one.
Uphill and down it wound its way between
Pale fields of grain and woods of darker green,
Skirting the river where cool waters run,
Glassy and blue beneath a summer sun.
Along the way, scarce noticing, we passed
Houses, barns, pastures thick with cows. At last
We stopped before a graveyard, journey done.

At her grandparents' tomb I took a spade,
Turned up the sod, and put her urn beneath
To be with them in place and time and death.
Then as I covered up the hole I made
My ears were opened and I heard the strong
And living sweetness of a robin's song.

WHEN TIME HAS CLOSED MY COFFIN-LID

When time has closed my coffin-lid
And left me in the dark for good,
I'll do no more the things I did—
Thank God I did them while I could.

VALLEY-FOLK

O narrow is the house where we are born,
And narrow are the fields in which we labour,
Fenced in by rails and woods that low hills neighbour
Lest they should spill their crops of hay and corn.
O narrow are the hates with which we thorn
Each other's flesh by gossip of the Grundies,
And narrow are our roads to church on Sundays,
And narrow too the vows of love we've sworn.

But through our fields the Saint John river flows
And mocks the patterned fields that we enclose;
There sometimes pausing in the dusty heat
We stretch cramped backs and lean upon our hoes
To watch a sea-gull glide with lazy beat
To wider regions where the river goes.

FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DISCUSSION

1. Why is the last line of the epigram, "When Time Has Closed My Coffin-Lid," a surprise? What does it say about the poet as a person?
2. About "How It Was," Fred Cogswell says, ". . . when I finished putting the sod over the ashes, it was as though I had been liberated and was free from some great weight . . . I used a bird as a kind of correlative for that feeling." Does this poem communicate a feeling of release to you, the reader? Why or why not?
3. Of the incident described in "Circular Saws," the poet says, "I thought that this would make quite a good extended metaphor for the kind of things which happen in life, and the kind of things which we inflict on other people as well." From Cogswell's comments and the poem, work out what the term "extended metaphor" means.
4. Analyse the last two lines of "The Butterfly," finding all the meanings in them that you can.
5. "The Butterfly" is described by the poet as a belated act of atonement for an incident that happened to him when he was young. If writing can serve as a release from feelings such as guilt or shame, can this also happen for you, the reader?
6. What is the irony in "The Rock Pile" to which Cogswell refers?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Write an essay describing the relationship between the ideas expressed in "New Brunswick" and "Valley-Folk."
2. Fred Cogswell says that, as a writer, he would "like to be remembered as someone who gave, as near as he possibly could, a kind of honest expression to what meant a great deal to him in his lifetime and in his living." George Bowering, on the other hand, says he hates poetry that expresses what the poet thinks about things. To what extent are these views contradictory?
3. Cogswell describes failure in writing poetry as inevitable. He says, "It lies in the limitations of words to express life. Words are static; life is dynamic, continually changing and much more intense than any words can be. Poems are consequently only a kind of halfway house to the real thing."

   Would you agree? Can words ever really express life?

RELEVANT WORKS

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Frederick William Cogswell was born in 1917 in East Centreville, New Brunswick, and educated at the Universities of New Brunswick and Edinburgh. He became a Professor of English at UNB after receiving his Ph.D from Edinburgh in 1952. In 1953, Cogswell became editor of *The Fiddlehead*, a magazine that has been published at the University of New Brunswick since 1945. He expanded this publication to include stories and reviews, as well as poems, and encouraged young, unknown writers. His first collection of poetry, *The Stunted Strong*, appeared in 1954 and was followed by thirteen others. (His most recent volume, *Meditations*, is a forthcoming publication.) He has also written translations, including *The Testament of Cresseid* (1957), and *The Complete Poems of Émile Nelligan* (1983). The recipient of numerous honors and awards, Fred Cogswell was made a member of the Order of Canada in 1982.

A conversation with

TOM DAWE

. . . I was born in Long Pond-Manuels in Conception Bay. It is only fifteen miles from St. John's, and I got into town quite a bit. St. John's was just a big outport, but I remember going with my father to see the Portugal ships, and we always shopped in St. John's. . . . My childrens' book *Landwash Days* tries to convey the spirit of what it was like to be young in the landwash with all the superstitions and the old beliefs and the games we played. . . . In retrospect, it's like some of the communities Thomas Hardy writes about in his novels, some of the old British institutions we still kept. Bonfire Night was always such a big occasion. . . .

. . . In Hemlock Cove, Rambike Arm, or some of those places, it was a great place to live, and it was a terrible place to live. It was a great place for the way you were close to the elements. It was a clean sort of existence, . . . but it was also a tough place. Probably what was toughest about it was the small-place attitude toward outsiders. And then we had our crimes. . . . We might not have locked our doors lots of times, but people still got murdered, and people still got raped, and there was still theft. But in those same places, too, I remember some things that could be called inspirational, human-interest stories, like men who were really poor themselves acting as Santa Claus for orphans. In small places, people really looked after each other, too. But that's life I guess; we kill each other at the same time we're looking after each other. I think that an outport is the world in microcosm.

. . . Most of the stories I heard were on Sunday night, if my mother was away at church. . . . The men in our family weren't great churchgoers. Sometimes, when she'd come back there'd be seven or eight men sitting around telling stories, and all of them would smoke. They weren't very particular where they dropped their ashes, you know. . . . They were great storytellers, and I was a sponge. I soaked up a lot of the stories they told, and I realized that the stories were told over the years. It's fascinating to think of a story told over, say, ten years. . . . When a story's told over ten years, it really gets honed and chiseled. The first time you hear the story, you're struck by it. Then, the same man tells the story a couple of weeks after. He says, "The story I told you a couple of weeks ago, do you remember that?" And he spills it again. He might pause to put some tobacco in his pipe or something, and he'll bring in a figure of speech he hadn't used before. If you've got a good memory, after all the years, all the new figures of speech and everything are brought in. . . . Many of [the tales] were of the ghost-story variety—the fairy tale, the ghost story, yarns of shipwreck—darker tales. I was always interested in that.

When I went to university, I got interested in contemporary poetry, and a lot of the themes of contemporary poetry are alienation, isolation . . . I think my work blends the two: the old storytelling tradition, the old yarn, the tale, and some of the darker aspects of our history with the contemporary. My mode of verse is really free verse. And I've noticed when critics write about my poetry, they put me very much in the contemporary tradition. I find that interesting: to be in the contemporary tradition and still be pretty well-rooted in the folk tradition.

. . . One of my favorite landscapes is a foggy landscape, a misty landscape, a barren landscape, sort of a spooky background. I think that's why I'm interested in Irish poetry and Irish folk tales. And we have some areas in Newfoundland where the Celtic attitude is so very prevalent. A landscape like that doesn't define everything. I'm more comfortable with it. There are no sharp edges; the images in it are not so precise. Probably it's an escape for me in a way. I heard a woman one time down on Cape Shore, and she talked about her son who might never come home again. She was there one day just leaning on the fence. It was a foggy day, and as the conversation went on, she brought out this bit about any day he

could come walking down through the fog, as if anything is possible in the fog. . . . In a foggy landscape like that, there's always a sense of expectation. . . . I love ghost stories, and the countries with all the great ghost stories are countries that have fog. I think countries that have a lot of sunshine and blue sky and clear air don't come up with the same quality of ghost stories. The ghosts are just not there. King Arthur is just not possible everywhere: possible in the British Isles, and possible in Newfoundland.

. . . I did a book of ghost stories some time ago. All the ghost stories were collected from my grandfather's house, and I remember one day talking to somebody who had done a review of the book, and he said, "So you just wanted to preserve those stories?" This person talked about it as if that was all the book was about —my preserving, my collecting the folklore. That was only part of it. More important for me is the poetry of the telling. And what I am now was shaped by those people and those stories. I think the past is going on.

. . . When I was in school, I was always good at making up rhymes. In Grade Eleven, I discovered people like E.J. Pratt, and what struck me about his work was he was writing about Newfoundland. I remember being so encouraged that somebody could have something universal to say, something I thought worth saying. The poetry seemed so powerful, and yet it was using our so-called local background.

I didn't get into publishing anything in magazines until the sixties, and I was then in my twenties and teaching school in an outport. I was somewhat isolated from St. John's and big libraries or anything like that, . . . and I thought it would be very satisfying to start creating. . . . So I started sending off material, poems to magazines, journals everywhere, and I enjoyed that, and I had some success and some failure . . . but I got into the awfully bad habit of getting a journal and trying to please the editor. I'd thumb through it and read it carefully later on and study it. And I remember writing some things that were so uncharacteristically me, and some of it was published, too. I look at them now, and they just don't belong with the rest of my stuff.

. . . There are times when you think you've got all kinds of choice as an artist. You put things in the notebooks, and you're going to work on that one of those days. . . . What you end up doing is writing the things within you that are the most tortuous, the most disturbing. It's like the things want to come out. The things that don't give you any choice, the things that pick you; these things choose you. I think what's chosen me so far would be the stuff from my best poems.

. . . I think Robert Frost used a phrase, "a stay against confusion," and I think very often a poem starts with a whole stage of confusion. It might start with a feeling of despair, or even a feeling of helplessness or loneliness, or some great burst of appreciation. You can't carry that around all the time, all that fermenting. You need an order, and the poem becomes your order. There are certain things I'm going to have to write about now because I've carried them around for awhile, and I don't think it's a healthy thing for me to do. I need to shape it into a poem. . . . Life is chaotic for me. There is chaos and confusion, darkness, everything; and when I write a poem, I'm imposing my own order. For a lot of writers, the poem becomes a refuge. It's a bit of order in a chaotic universe.

. . . If I had to list my themes, the first would be the imagination, the human imagination. Another is what it is to be a human being looking back over the stages of life, and looking ahead. . . . I'm interested in mutability, change, transition. I got into the resettlement poetry for that reason. Not that I wanted to praise the government or condemn the government for resettling the people from their little places, but because of my interest in mutability and change.

. . . I've always been interested in ghost-town Newfoundland. . . . You go there, and if there's an old store left, there's a sense of pastness. . . . It's like they might be still there. There's something spiritual about it— the way the sun hits a particular wall or a particular headstone—the way nature is taking it all back. I've always been fascinated with mutability, the way everything changes and the way we seem puny in the face of it all. You know we're only dust. . . . So, that's been

a theme, and the individual, the loner against a group, that's been a theme. A number of my poems, especially the bigger narratives, have been that way. Somebody is coming in and trying to fit into the group, and he's not what they expected, what they wanted. He's different and he just can't fit in and he moves on. That's the familiar plot in some of my narrative poems. Isolation, alienation is certainly a theme in my work. Other themes in my work include . . . an appreciation for nature and the whole scheme of things. That's a kind of celebration. I think that kind of thing offsets the poetry that people call dark and gloomy, the resettlement poetry and stuff like that.

. . . I think I'm very positive in my poetry. "A Consecration" is a good example of that. In that one, the clergyman tells the people not to desecrate the church. Take it down when we move, but don't take the boards and use them for anything else. They might be used for a pool hall or something like that. Most of the people would feel uneasy about that. But I've known examples of somebody who took the boards and built a house, and the consecration certainly wasn't spoiled. In that house, I'd like to imagine everything starting all over again, and a new baby is born, a young couple start out their life, and there's holiness in that. . . .

. . . There's a story about an area in Newfoundland, and it concerns my great-grandmother. When she was younger, she was berry picking with a party, and she went astray from the group. She was gone for the whole day. The elders said she was spirited away by the fairies, the little people of the woods. We were always interested in the story as children because of the inexplicable things, like how she crossed some of the big rivers before she came out of the woods. She came out of the woods down around Topsail, and she never remembered crossing Manuels River or any place like that. I wrote a poem about the incident. It's a contemporary poem in free verse with me, contemporary man, looking in on that world of my ancestors. . . . The poem is not just about my great-grandmother or a fairy tale for that matter. It's a contemporary poem that deals with alienation, isolation, and a juxtaposition of worlds. Looking in on the world of my ancestors, I see it as a fairy-tale realm—grass grows up the middle of the road, horse and cart disappear into the twilight. I think the poem blends romanticism with a contemporary, realistic attitude.

["The Dead Boy"] is based on an old superstition of coppers on the eyes. . . . I found that an intriguing thing when I was really small. You've heard the old practice—on the eyes of the corpse, they placed coppers. I guess it goes way back to something about sealing the spirit and probably something ancient about the metal. This poem was built on a memory of having an older woman or somebody lift me up to see a little boy in a casket. The little boy in the casket was about my age. It shocked me to see somebody I had seen walking around in life with coppers on his eyes. . . .When you're small like that, a copper seems kind of big, a big piece of money. A fifty-cent piece seems like a spare tire. The more I thought on that, the sadder it got. He's there in the coffin. We probably went into the shop a few times together and got bubble gum. But because of the funeral, the blinds are down. That disturbed me for a few years, and you live with it by giving it some shape, putting it into a poem. The form of this one is . . . like haiku. . . . The classic haiku has seventeen syllables. You can do haiku with more or even less. The physical appearance of the poem is quite slight on the page. So I thought I'd use repetition . . . and this haiku kind of form.

. . . a poem to John Clare. John Clare was one of the minor Romantic poets. He's making a comeback now, in our own time. My phrase "struggle into light" is taken from John Clare. He was a very unfortunate man. He spent twenty years or so in a mental asylum. This poem is my appreciation, in part, to John Clare. It's addressed to Clare.

. . . I feel like I'm alive when I'm creating something. If I'm not creating, if I have those days when I'm not, I feel miserable. I've got to be doing. I've gone past those days now where I thought I wrote things just to get published in a magazine. I don't care anymore if it goes into a magazine. I've just got to create anyway.

A FAIRY TALE

My great grandmother
is a young girl
lost in the woods.
She carries a berry bucket
and cries
because she has no money
to drive the fairies away.

Watching her,
I am old enough
to be her father.

Her path sinks deeper
into deep red turf
and bright leaves are sharp.
Old wood has reaching arms
and grey, long, knobby legs.
Branches are glowing fingers
that cup and cradle the sun.
Faintly, she hears music
on a soft, sap breath
and knows it is not the brook's.
Far far away are the calling boys
with jam stains on their lips
and laughing girls
so clumsy in black, rubber boots
and the clang of dippers.

Just before twilight
she walks out of the woods
and finds a young man fencing
near a crab-apple tree.
He runs to his father
for a horse and cart
and offers her a ride back home.

On the long way back
through lingering, still-twig light
they sit close together.
He sings an old love song
learned by some fireside.
The grass is long and green
right up the middle of the road.
Between her knees
she holds her day's berries
like a cask of jewels.

I am patiently waiting
to be born
and wondering
when the cart
will turn into a turnip
or a big red apple on wheels . . .

I call out to them
as they slide down
gradually
into leafy sunset.
Waving my empty dipper
I run after them.
But they ignore me.
The night closes around everything.
And strange stars come out.

THE DEAD BOY (circa 1946)

Coppers on his eyes,
A new king's head right and left,
And sisters crying.

Coppers on his eyes
And grandmother telling us
Of clear, golden streets.

Coppers on his eyes
And someone lifting us up
To see their shining.

Coppers on his eyes,
Enough for two candy canes,
But shop blinds are down.

A CONSECRATION

Luke remembered
their last days on the island
gathering what was
to be taken
as young gulls swayed
above the sun-grazed swell
and a lingering mist
ghosted in the garden gleam.
And he remembered
the clergyman telling them
to burn all the boards
from the dismantled church
because such wood was consecrated.
But next day Luke's brother came
in the big white skiff
and took the wood away
to build a house.
And as the months passed
Luke was uneasy
about the anointed wood
until that morning
when he heard the meek cry
of his brother's firstborn
within the sanctuary
of the new walls
as dawn stroked window glass
and kettle mist ascended
to the sturdy beams.

"STRUGGLE INTO LIGHT": A Poem to John Clare

"A struggle into light,"
was what you called it,
your flash into a fame of sorts
in a world
when rustic bards like yourself
were fading from fashion.
Yours was a sun on a petal spell,
a dart of robin-red,
trout-dapple in the dawn.

I can picture you too
glowing for awhile
in old Londown town,
stamping big country boots
along the cobblestones,
a bit of a Bobby Burns
in your homespun jacket,
your love of ale,
your twinkle for the lasses.

When you got back home,
trying to find poems
in the fields again,
there were curious souls
coming by in carriages
to see what a peasant poet,
so unlettered and all,
could be doing
in his element.

It must have been weary, John,
with fields to be tilled
and babies to be fed.
I think you called it
"wearing into sunshine,"
when literary folk
dropped by
and called you
from your labours.
You complained one time too
that you were promised books
and all kinds of patronage
before they dropped their heads
in smug, "good morning attitudes."

Years later, in your final fading,
did you expect very much
when they shipped your corpse home
from Northampton Asylum in 1864?
Could you believe that nobody,
not even one of your own,
would come to receive you?
Could you ever see your remains
being waked in the shadows
of a village pub?

And as for your last request:
when you asked for burial
on the north side
of the churchyard,
right in middle ground,
where sun could linger
on your grave,
did you expect
that they would grant you
middle ground?

Were you surprised, John,
when they moved you south
to the coldest side
where sun hardly lingers
at all?
Were you somehow expecting it
when they set you down
in cold clay
where the shadow
of a chancel falls?

FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DISCUSSION

1. Tom Dawe says that the poem, "A Fairy Tale," is "not just about my great-grandmother or a fairy tale for that matter. It's a contemporary poem that deals with alienation, isolation, and a juxtaposition of worlds." Was this evident to you from reading it? If so, in what ways?

2. The poem "Struggle Into Light" is an appreciation of John Clare, a minor Romantic poet. Are there any similarities between a Romantic poet such as Clare and a contemporary poet like Dawe?

   Why might Dawe feel the need to pen this appreciation?

3. In his interview, Tom Dawe explains what "A Consecration" is about. Read his prose explanation, then read the poem. Which has more impact for you—the poetry or the prose? Why? Does each have the same meaning?

4. This writer says that a poem often starts for him with a stage of confusion, a feeling of despair, helplessness, or loneliness. Writing helps him impose order on an otherwise chaotic universe. If writing helps the poet release chaotic feelings, can the same thing occur for the reader?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Read about the Japanese stanza form called haiku. If Dawe's, "The Dead Boy," is not strictly haiku, why does he say it is "like" haiku? Why did he choose this form?

2. Dawe says he got into his "resettlement poetry" because of his interest in mutability, in change and transition. Read some of this poetry to discover how he expresses these themes.

RELEVANT WORKS

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_____. "Struggle Into Light." In *TickleAce*. Number 7 (Fall 1983), pp. 37-39. St. John's, Nfld.: Published by the editors, 1983. A poem.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Thomas Dawe was born in Long Pond-Manuels, Conception Bay, Newfoundland, where he still resides, on Dawe's Road. His poetry and tales have appeared in such publications as *Fiddlehead, Alive, Poet, Crossroads II,* and *TickleAce*. His first collection, *Connections*, was published in 1972, and was followed by *Hemlock Cove and After* (1975), *In A Small Cove* (1978), *How Sly The Big Old Connor Is* (1979), *The Far Island* (1979), and *Island Spell* (1981). Since the publication of his book, *Landwash Days: Newfoundland Folklore, Sketches and Verse for Youngsters* (1980), he has written other books for young readers: *A Gommil from Bumblebee Bight* (a collection of nonsense verse); *Angishore, Boo-Man and Clumper* (a Newfoundland folk alphabet) and *Yarns of Ishmael Drake* (a collection of folklore). Tom Dawe has written numerous radio scripts for the CBC, notably "Newfoundland Ghost Stories," and is presently a professor of English at Memorial University.

A conversation with

ANNE HEBERT

It is very difficult to know for whom I write. I believe one must write primarily for oneself, at first. The writer has something to say and wants to express it in the best possible manner, but also wants to communicate—except that one doesn't know with whom. One imagines the ideal reader: that is, a reader able to grasp everything, who would be a brother. When it's written, one just throws it out like a bottle at sea with a message inside, and hopes somebody will find it, read it, and enjoy it. The throw of the dice.

When I was very, very young, very small, I read mostly children's books, tales, [Hans Christian] Andersen's tales, and Countess de Ségur's books. I think all that children's literature, so rich in symbol and myth, made such a deep impression on me that I became very strongly committed to that mysterious world that permeates children's tales.

I believe that childhood and adolescence leave the deepest mark on a person. In my case, those years, the most important in life, were spent in Québec, and for better or for worse, I am tied to my past. And even though I write of the present, the past is still there . . . woven through me. It's my life, and I can't . . . I don't want to give it up; that would be to deny the part of me that is the most profound, most intense.

I think, in Québec, poets have been important, because for a very long time they were the voice of the silent mass. Not merely because this is typically a poet's role, but because it's an affirmation of life in the face of the world, and that's extremely important. I think in times of crisis, poetry takes on its full significance and expresses best the true nature of a people. I think of France under the Occupation, the Resistance; at that time, a great number of poems expressed the French soul. It's the same for Québec.

A poem written is a poem given. In other words, the reader is free to read the poem as he likes. . . . A reader notices things I may have missed . . . things there already, because a poem has many layers, rather like flaky pastry, very light and transparent on top. There are all kinds of implications within a poem, and the reader can carry his own fantasies and sensitivity into his reading, altering the poem. But when the interpretation is false . . . whether the reader is completely aware of it or not, he has nevertheless created it. Reading is not by itself a creative act; it is a re-creation, a remolding, and it takes a lot of delving to uncover the hidden truths.

When I write a poem, it nearly always comes to me complete. But with a long poem, it's as if I discover one side at a time . . . like the crescent moon, not the full. It doesn't come all at once. One can't put the picture together unless the missing part is recovered. Still, one is almost always given the complete picture, even though its contours are slightly blurred and some details need to be added. Essentially, it's all there from the start.

There is something explosive in a poem, something very violent that bursts out suddenly, because it's so intense, so short. It's a blazing fire, but very brief. With a novel, the flame must be nursed day after day and rekindled when it has died and is momentarily lost. One must wait patiently until it springs to life again. It's a kind of patient taming of the fire, the fire inside us, with all the risks that that involves, and with all the beauty, the ecstasy, too.

It is quite difficult to understand a process when something starts as an intuition, more of a sensation than an idea. For me, at least, poetry isn't an abstraction. It's tangible. It's a living thing. And the desire to express it in words is triggered by a sensation that permeates and enlightens. Sometimes, one can be deeply moved by all sorts of things one sees in real life in the streets, or talking to people, and in the transition to writing they can be irretrievably lost. But, something lingers, something that urges us, compels us to speak. This, I believe, represents the transition from life to poetry.

If I analyse myself, I understand why death is an issue that often occurs in my poetry and prose. I can give reasons, but they don't satisfy me. I could say, for example, that my father was seriously ill when I was a child, that he nearly died the year I was born, that my mother was seriously ill, that I lost my small brother when I was young, and that death took a heavy toll of my mother's family. It was a large family of twelve children, only three of whom survived. Children, at that time, died of diphtheria, whooping cough, tuberculosis, measles, etc. Such events weigh heavily on one early in life. Mind you, my mother had a sense of humor, and she could be joyous; she was not a person to mourn all the time over the sad events she experienced in childhood. I think this left a deep mark on me. And then, well, that's the sort of thing everybody experiences in life, the loss of one's friends and those dear to us. These events only heightened an anxiety about death already inside me.

If a young person came to me and said, "I want to write like Anne Hébert," I would advise him strongly against doing so. He doesn't have to write like Anne Hébert, or anybody else for that matter. He must write as himself, discover his own identity first, and express himself without trying to imitate somebody. Let him try out as many paths as necessary, but once he has found his own path, he should stick to it and not imitate anyone.

If I were to lecture on my writings, I would say they speak of the reverse side of the world, with its hidden springs. When I write about human beings, I don't portray them only from the outside, through their gestures, their looks, the color of their hair, their eyes, etc., but I reach beyond to that aura of mystery that hovers around them and still baffles me, and which I convey intact. This is my greatest ambition: to express this mystery unaltered. Like meeting somebody: you speak, he answers, ideas are exchanged, a conversation begins, but in each of you, a part remains secret. I believe that's one way of seeing literature, as an attempt to make this secret side tangible, not to explain it, because I couldn't. And, besides, I don't want to explain it. I want to convey things in their living reality, with their mystery.

from **DUSTY IMAGE**

Knock it all down
The village
And the castle

This castle mirage
Off to the right of
Childhood.

The lane of pines
Ruts
Like an evil road

And we walk along
Its widening
Abyss.

from **I AM THE EARTH THE WATER**

I am the earth, the water, you can not wade my shallows,
my friend, my friend

I am the well, the thirst, cross me at your peril,
my friend, my friend

Noon is made to burst over the sea, slack of the sun,
melted word, you were so clear, my friend, my friend

You shall not leave me as you wipe the shadow from your
face like a fleeting wind, my friend, my friend

LIFE IN THE CASTLE

It is a castle of forbears
Without fire or table
Dust or tapestry.

The perverse enchantment of the place
Is only in its polished mirrors.

Here there is nothing else to do
But see yourself, day-long, night-long,

Hurl your image at the hard fountain-pools
Your hardest image without shade or colour.

See, how these mirrors are as deep
As cupboards
There's always a dead one living behind the foil
Covering swiftly your reflection
Clinging to you like seaweed

Fitting itself to you, naked and thin,
Simulating love in a slow bitter shudder.

FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DISCUSSION

1. Death is often present in Anne Hébert's poetry. What is the relationship between the living and the dead in "Life in the Castle"?

2. The writer says that children's literature, "so rich in symbol and myth," has made a deep impression upon her. Does "Dusty Image" reflect this influence?

3. In the interview, Anne Hébert remarks, "If I were to lecture on my writings, I would say they speak of the reverse side of the world, with its hidden springs . . . I reach beyond to that aura of mystery . . . I don't want to explain it . . . I want to convey things in their living reality, with their mystery." How do you react to her attempt to convey mystery, but not explain it? Does "I am The Earth The Water" accomplish this?

   If this method makes the poetry difficult to understand, is this good or bad?

4. "There are all kinds of implications within a poem, and the reader can carry his own fantasies and sensitivity into his readings, altering the poem." What is the relationship between reader and poem suggested here?

   Does a poem have only one meaning? Does the meaning change depending on the reader? Can a poem have *any* meaning that the reader happens to derive from it?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Several English translations of Anne Hébert's poetry exist. If you understand French, read some of her poems in their language of composition and then in their English versions. How do they differ? Is it possible for an English translation to convey the original French adequately?

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A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Anne Hébert was born in 1916 in Sainte-Catherine-de-Fossambault, Québec, and grew up in Québec City. She was encouraged to write by her father, Maurice Hébert, a literary critic, and by her cousin, the poet Saint-Denys Garneau. Her first collection of poems, *Les songes en équilibre*, was published in 1942 and was awarded the Prix David. A collection of short stories, *Le torrent*, was written in 1942 but not published until 1950 because prospective publishers interpreted the title story, about revolt, as too symbolic of the French-Canadian situation. *Le tombeau des rois* (1953), and *Mystère de la parole* (1960), were published under the title *Poèmes* in 1960. Her three plays, *Le temps sauvage, La mercière assassinée,* and *Les invités au procès* were published under the title *Le temps sauvage* in 1967. In addition to her plays, poetry, and short stories, Anne Hébert has also written a number of novels: *Les chambres de bois* (1958); *Kamouraska* (1970), filmed by Claude Jutra in 1973; *Les enfants du sabbat* (1975), which won a Governor General's Literary Award; *Héloïse* (1980); and *Les fous de bassan* (1982), which was awarded the Prix Fémina.

A conversation with

JACK HODGINS

My main interest in writing is in storytelling. The narrative itself is what fascinates me. Watching people behave with other people. And the writing of prose has always seemed a more natural way of approaching it—as opposed to poetry or playwriting. I enjoy, or perhaps even need, the advantages that are given to me as a fiction writer with respect to narrative voice: an ability to observe, to record, to follow. Although I don't write poetry, I do sometimes re-write passages of prose in a poetic manner. I will break a paragraph down to look like free verse to get the rhythm right. I cannot write a story or a novel until I've got the right rhythm of the voice that's telling it. The opening pages of *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne* must have been re-written one hundred times, because I knew I was creating a rhythm that was going to carry me right through the entire novel. And it had to be right. So I was writing it as free verse quite literally on the page. . . .

The hardest thing for a writer to face is a blank page of paper. It's the most insulting thing facing you at the beginning of a day. It's like saying "I dare you to put anything intelligent on me." So a pencil, pen, or typewriter gets me going. A line to work with. Words to push around. An image of a character walking somewhere. A facial expression. Somebody looking up at me out of the page to write it down and follow to see where it goes. It may become useful; it may not become useful at all.

It's an exciting experience for a writer to have an audience of any kind because otherwise he's talking to himself. The exciting thing about having an audience within schools is that your work is being taken seriously. You are going to bump into readers who will want to pursue your works, read other books that you've written, or continue to read books that you're going to write in the future. Also, the readers are meeting the books in a situation that treats the work with some respect. The books are being treated as works of art, presumably that deserve some examination. If the story is presented as a thing that is to be dissected and divided into little pieces and looked at through a microscope, the result could be that that particular work is killed for the reader. In the hands of a sensitive teacher, on the other hand, the thing could come alive as students discover a new way of looking at things.

One of the first tasks I had to face in writing the novel, *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*, was to introduce the reader to the kind of town I was going to make use of throughout the novel. This meant taking the reader on a little trip up and down the different streets of the town, meeting some of the people I thought might be interesting and who might represent the kind of people who live there. Somewhere in this journey, I discovered this strange creature out in the middle of the square dressed in a bizarre costume. Of course I had to stop and find out why he was there. It was the mayor himself . . . yelling directions at youngsters cleaning up the mess that a tidal wave had left when it washed over the town. . . .

At first, [Mayor] Weins was little more than a comic figure, a colorful creature representing a certain aspect of the town, a certain aspect of life on Vancouver Island, or a certain way of thinking that brings about change on Vancouver Island (many aspects of which I don't necessarily approve). And I guess my interest became a matter of curiosity. What makes a man like this tick? Why is he willing to make a public fool of himself for the projects he thinks are so important? And I moved in a little closer to attempt to follow him around a bit. During the progress of the novel, I discovered that he was only one of many people I was fascinated with. In fact, he didn't become more important than others. But he certainly represented an important aspect of life in a town like that. . . .

I had already written the first 100 pages of the novel and introduced myself to the town and the people . . . before I had any sense of the structure. I had no idea how to tell a story

where five or six people were all equally important. . . . Mayor Weins, in many of my visits, insisted on remaining a caricature. He was always in costume, always on stage, so to speak. The whole town was his audience, and actually I wasn't much interested in going beyond that. I laughed at him. I had a good time thinking what a fool he was . . . wheeling about town getting himself all excited, trying to get other people interested in projects to bring tourists in from all over the world and really put this town on the map. I could see it drove Weins crazy that no one out there had ever heard of Port Annie. Year after year no real tourists ever came to visit.

. . . While travelling around, listening to people's conversation and meeting people and more or less snooping around, I discovered I needed something to read in my hotel and went out to a magazine shop and discovered a published script of Robert Altman's *Nashville*. I had enjoyed the movie very much. I bought the script, took it back to my hotel room, started reading it, and suddenly realized this was the structure I wanted for the novel. I wanted to have all five or six plots going at the same time, but just touch briefly on each one, back and forth, back and forth.

Weins remained for me . . . an object of satire right through the working out of the plots of all these different characters, right to the point of the gigantic mud slide that wiped his town off the side of the mountain into the ocean. And to the point where the survivors of the town were gathering together at the nearby Squatters Flats to celebrate the fact they were still alive, and to lay plans for moving out of the area. I got very caught up in describing the celebration, the sense of joy and relief and hope among the survivors. And tended to forget about Weins. But at some point in the writing of this celebration, I discovered that there was one man at the very centre of it who wasn't celebrating at all. This, of course, was good old Weins. I moved in a little closer and discovered—no, it wasn't so much a discovery as a sudden realization—that he wasn't just a cartoon figure. Without my being aware of it, this man had all along been a real-life, breathing human being whose feelings had been perhaps just a little less visible than other people's. My heart broke when I saw that, among all the celebrating people, he didn't know what was going on. He didn't understand.

There are several novelists whose approach to character has been particularly attractive to me and from whom I've learned. John Steinbeck, for instance, has an enormous sense of enjoying his people and having a good time with them. This is an experience I have when I'm writing. I often get impatient with a character I'm not enjoying, and he finds himself having to go find another writer to write about him because he disappears off my page. I like to enjoy the people I'm writing about. William Faulkner is another writer whose approach to character interests me, in the sense that he's enormously curious about what goes on inside them. I'm not usually interested in just watching people behave. I'm interested in imagining what it's like to be that person, to walk around for awhile in the person's shoes. In fact, that's one of the greatest joys in writing fiction. You become people other than yourself and see the world with other people's eyes. Those two writers probably had the largest influence on my approach to character, although I've learned other aspects of writing from many other people.

It's not impossible to imagine Weins suddenly appearing in a Steinbeck novel. It's been years since I've read Steinbeck, but I remember recently seeing the movie *Cannery Row* and immediately having a sense of, yes, that's basically the same world I'm used to. Those are basically the same people I enjoy writing about. A community like a Steinbeck community could very easily spawn a Jacob Weins. The Jacob Weins who came back to be part of the story, "The Sumo Revisions," was a different Jacob Weins, or at least a different look at the same Jacob Weins. Steinbeck might have been less interested in the Weins that, I discovered, was still nagging to be written about. He was no longer a comic figure. He was, in fact, a mysterious figure. Someone I was immensely curious about, whom I wanted to understand.

At the end of *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*, Weins is a man without a town, without a job, without a role to play, and especially without his costumes. Everything has been washed away. In the gap between that novel and "The Sumo Revisions," he, in my imagination, wandered around the face of the earth trying to find who he was without all of these trappings. I picked him up perhaps a year later on the streets of Tokyo when he was a little closer to understanding the new role he must learn to play.

Normally, when I finish writing a book, I don't read it. I put it on the shelf, and those people in my imagination have lives of their own, as the book does. They go out and they wander in and out of other people's lives, but they don't come back to report to me. Occasionally, a character will come back and want to be in another story. Sometimes I very quickly dismiss him and say "You've had your turn." But Jacob Weins came back and stayed. Refused to leave. There was a feeling in me that I hadn't done him justice. I felt that I had cheated both him and myself by not looking at him more closely. So I thought, well I'll just whip off a little short story and get you out of my system. What happened instead was that he came for a fairly lengthy visit and I found myself writing a novella.

I think that the Weins of *Joseph Bourne* couldn't have been anything but what he was for the sake of the novel. If I had known at the beginning what I knew at the end, if I had decided that this was going to be an in-depth study of the man, I would have written a very different novel. For one thing, he has the kind of personality that would be capable of taking over the whole novel and reducing everyone else to a position of secondary importance. So I find that I can't separate that treatment of him from that novel. At the same time, I acknowledge that the novel by itself needed the postscript which "The Sumo Revisions" provides.

[Jacob Weins] is so alive to me, and was so alive to me when I finished writing "The Sumo Revisions," that I can easily imagine him out there walking around the world. I could easily imagine bumping into him one day. The experience of seeing him translated to dramatization in a way is the equivalent of turning a corner and meeting Jacob Weins. He is alive. I cannot distinguish between the actor and the character. My feelings when I'm watching the actor Jacob Weins expressing his feelings are very much the same as when I was watching these things happen on the page. Very, very real. I'm convinced that he walks out of that scene and continues on with his life.

. . . Weins chose to contemplate the collection of little dishes laid out before him. Was there anything here that he knew? One was a bowl of rice. That much was safe. Another when he leaned closer smelled like seaweed. Probably soup. He could handle that as well. But the rest might easily have been dropped on the table from Mars. Bits and pieces of things in some kind of batter. Dark suspicious-looking sauces. Where were you supposed to begin? He watched Conrad drive the ends of his chopsticks into his bowl of rice, dig out a wad, and lift it up to his lips. It fell to his lap. "Shit." He put down the sticks, looked into his cup, and filled it up from the bottle. Then he tossed it back. He stared at his collection of food dishes as if he thought they were plotting against him. He filled up his cup again.

"And then," Mabel said, "along came this wooden door that was floating on the water. My goodness, Hiroshi, I've never seen such imagination put to use in a theatre. How do they do it? And on the door was the decomposing body of his wife. If you thought she was in bad shape *before* she died," she told Weins, "you ought to have seen her later. Yuk. What a mess. The door is caught on his fishing line but he certainly doesn't want to reel it in. Oh, the look on his face!" If it was anything like the look on *her* face, he was worse than terrified, he was thrown into a convulsive fit. "But it floats right up to him anyway and—I can't even begin to imagine how they do these things—just as he's hauling it up the stone wall, all the flesh drops off the body and there he is faced with a skeleton!"

Aieeeeeeeee! Mabel turned in circles, shaking her hands. As if she'd touched death and it stuck to her fingers. Aieeeeeeeee! Sitting through five hours of melodrama had affected her mind. Maybe she'd snapped. Even Conrad looked mildly alarmed. Eleanor ducked her head. The smile that Hiroshi reserved for Mabel, the woman who disapproved of him, had died. Weins decided to devote his attention to seeing if he had any better control of his chopsticks than he'd had in the last restaurant they'd been in. He hadn't.

"I am happy that Mrs. Weins enjoyed the Kabuki so much," Hiroshi said, perhaps to Eleanor, who was on his right. Perhaps to Weins, who was the next one down the table. He picked up a piece of the mystery food with chopsticks, dragged it through a dish of sauce, and popped it into his mouth. "Maybe when she is settled in Ottawa, she can persuade the people in charge of cultural events there to arrange for Kabuki to be performed at the—what is it?—National Centre of Arts?"

"Ottawa?" Eleanor said. "Why would she want to live there?"

Exactly the question that must have occurred to Mabel, who halted her spin in mid screech and nearly toppled. Weins suspected he knew what they were about to hear.

"Well, Ottawa is surely where they will be making their home, once Mr. Weins has been elected to Parliament?"

"Parliament?" Mabel said, and dropped into the chair where she could look Weins in the eye. He could read in her face what she thought: the minute he was out of her sight had he planned his whole future without her? What happened

to the notion of consulting the woman you lived with? "Don't look at *me*," he said. "Down there is the man who suggested it. What do I know? I thought my days in politics were over."

"They are," Mabel said, in a tone that declared the discussion closed. She picked up her chopsticks and, with the help of her other hand, arranged them between her fingers. She had not, however, managed to engineer any food up as far as her mouth when Soseki-san re-entered the room. She lowered her chopsticks for the introduction.

Some hasty conversation in Japanese, then Hiroshi said, "I explained to Soseki-san that you have returned from a performance at Kabuki-za and that you seem to have enjoyed the ghost story much more than Mr. Weins enjoyed the sumo this afternoon. Soseki-san says perhaps that is because Kabuki allows the defeated to seek a delicious revenge while in sumo the vanquished must bow politely and disappear." Hiroshi looked at Weins and grinned. "Of course I told him that when you are an elected member of your government you will undoubtedly take whatever action is necessary to have Kabuki and sumo matches both make regular visits to your country."

Was he making fun? God help him, his heart had been racing madly since the topic had come up, no kidding either. There must be something in what the boy was saying or why would he feel this way? No sooner had Ottawa been mentioned than he'd seen himself going in the tailor shop tomorrow. He even knew what he wanted. A business suit, or two. For formal occasions, or banquets and speeches in front of huge crowds, you needed a three-piece suit. When they made him minister in charge of—would it be Culture, or Industry, Trade and Commerce?—he would need a variety of first-class dressy suits for the meetings he'd have to chair, the big-shot businessmen and scholars he would need to meet, the functions he would be expected to open.

"Soseki-san says he could have guessed you were a man who would be much in the public eye, an important official. Just like that gentleman who drew your picture."

Mabel wanted to know what picture they were talking about, an edge of indignation in her voice. As resident artist, did she think it an act of betrayal to turn to a stranger? He reached for the rolled-up paper he'd propped in the corner behind his chair and unrolled it for her. "They've got the ears right, anyway," she said, and made it clear there was nothing else on the piece of paper which deserved a comment.

Soseki-san leaned forward for a better look, and said something to Hiroshi. "Soseki-san says the retired man has very few choices, unfortunately. To die. To wallow in self-pity. To paralyse himself with fear. Or to live in the way his own life has prepared him to live. At sixty-one years of age, whatever talent has surfaced is surely meant to be used."

"But he *has* no talent for politics," Mabel protested. She looked at the old man as if she would ask him to mind his own business. "He proved over and over again that he has no talent at all for politics." She looked strained, her face looked drawn, would she soon be fishing around in her purse for pills? Perhaps she saw herself and Weins slipping back into patterns she thought they had left behind.

Hiroshi translated Mabel's observation for the old man, then hastily switched to English. "I did not say he had any talent for politics—how would I know such a thing? Jacob Weins appears to me to have the instincts of an actor."

Eleanor put her hands up over her face and groaned. Weins felt his own face burn—not just his ears this time, but everything from throat to forehead. Mabel, whose face expressed astonishment, looked at Weins as if he were some new curiosity just installed before her. "Well I could have told you that, I guess. Being a mayor was only an excuse to wear your closetful of costumes. And to organize performances. That wasn't politics. You'd have been better off acting in that play I saw, for all the good you ever did as a politician." She smiled, and squeezed his wrist. In case this was disturbing news.

"Exactly my point," Hiroshi said. Weins was beginning to feel invisible. They were talking as if he weren't even here. "In my country," Hiroshi said, "the place for an actor to best make use of his talent is on the stage or the movie screen. But in your country . . ." He paused to watch Conrad concentrate on raising a piece of food to his mouth between the pinched ends of his chopsticks. It fell before he could nab it with his teeth, and dropped to the table.

"In my country, as I said, an actor would just naturally go onto the stage, or into the movies, but after a few years living in your country I saw that things were quite different there. In your country the best way for an actor to make full use of his talents is not on the stage—who would bother to notice him there?—and certainly not on the screen, since that is reserved for foreigners, I understand—but as a politician. Who else has so many opportunities to command an audience? Who else is measured by the amount of success he has at playing a role, at wearing a mask? In a country of stuffy legislators a genuine actor would shine!"

"You mean as entertainment," Weins said. "Like the clown who dances around in the bullring?" He was thinking of that book again, and how the clowns distracted the bull while the matadors jabbed in their knives, or made their escape. Was Hiroshi suggesting he become a diversion, a public clown who distracted the voters while the crooked politicians robbed them blind?

Hiroshi laughed. "No, no, no, not that at all. I mean as a colourful source of energy and life, which is something quite different. Is there a country in the world that can afford to turn down that?"

A different outfit every day in the House of Commons. How could he stop these thoughts from crowding in? He saw himself as Sir John A. Macdonald, he saw himself as a coureur-de-bois, he saw himself marching down the stone hallways of the Parliament Buildings dressed in the impressive costume of a Viking. Surely there weren't any rules against being colourful! Television cameramen, bored with dreary speeches and dull identical suits, would just naturally lavish most of their attention on him. No matter what topic had been discussed on the floor that day, newsmen would be sure to seek him out for a comment, confident that whatever outfit he'd chosen to wear, it would be something that would catch attention in homes across the country.

FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DISCUSSION

1. "My feelings when I'm watching the actor Jacob Weins expressing his feelings are very much the same as when I was watching these things happen on the page. Very, very real. I'm convinced that he walks out of that scene and continues on with his life." A character is only a product of the imagination—a fiction—and yet Jack Hodgins talks about Weins almost as if he were a real person. How do you see the relationship between this writer and the character he created?

2. Read the excerpt from the novella "The Sumo Revisions" and watch the television adaptation of the excerpt. In what way does the novella differ from the drama? How is writing a television drama different from writing a work of fiction?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Jack Hodgins mentions that "A community like a Steinbeck community could very easily spawn a Jacob Weins." Read *Cannery Row*—or some other work by Steinbeck—and compare it with Hodgins' work.

   Do you think Jacob Weins would "fit" in a Steinbeck novel?

2. Select a passage from "The Sumo Revisions." Then try writing a dramatic television adaptation yourself.

3. Read *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne* and "The Sumo Revisions." Compare the Jacob Weins of the latter with the Weins of the former. How does his character change?

RELEVANT WORKS

Hodgins, Jack. *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne, or, A Word or Two about those Port Annie Miracles*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1979. 271 p. A novel. Winner of a Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction (1979).

_____. *The Barclay Family Theatre*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1983. Novellas. (Includes "The Sumo Revisions.")

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Born in 1938 in the Comox Valley of Vancouver Island, Jack Hodgins received a B.Ed. from the University of British Columbia in 1961, where he studied creative writing under Earle Birney. He taught high school in Nanaimo, and has acted as writer-in-residence at Simon Fraser University (1977) and the University of Ottawa (1979-1980).

His first collection of short stories, *Spit Delaney's Island*, appeared in 1976. This was followed by two novels, *The Invention of the World* (1977) and *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne* (1979). Another collection of stories, *The Barclay Family Theatre*, appeared in 1981. Hodgins has also edited three school anthologies: *Voice and Vision* (1971) with W.H. New, *The Frontier Experience* (1975), and *The West Coast Experience* (1976).

A conversation with

SUZANNE JACOB

I was born in northern Québec, in Amos. It's a little town of 10,000 *habitants*.

My mother was a pianist, so we would sing a lot. Otherwise, it was a normal life. Maybe I was a little bit boy . . . how do you call it in English, a girl that is kind of a boy, playing hockey and fighting all the time? . . . my mother would, through song and music, tell us a lot of stories. But literature? I did not know that a writer existed. I was maybe fifteen. And it was a teacher that told me that I would be a writer. She saw in my production [class work], probably, I don't know. And I asked her what is that, what do they do?

. . . I went to school in Amos and when I was fourteen I went down to Nicolet. It's on the south side of the St. Laurent [St. Lawrence River], a little town where they have very good college, with a lot of music, theatre, painting, and normal scholastic [studies]. After that, I went to Montreal University, to begin my studies in French literature. And in French literature, at that time, they would explain to us all the writers by [means of] Freud so, three months later, I couldn't stand it. I would prefer to go in psychology than to be in literature with Freud. So, I didn't stay at university.

I began to write, being conscious that I was writing late. I think it was late in my life. At the beginning, I was a comedian. I played theatre for three years and I began to suffer in not writing. . . . Then I went singing. I would write my songs, so I was beginning to write. And, through that, writing poems, but not being conscious that it was good work. I was seriously writing but not in the system of literature. It was just my own activity. And slowly, being in that activity, I wrote my first novel that I gave as a gift, Christmas gift, to a friend because I had no money. So I wanted to make a personal gift. So I wrote that novel *Flore Cocon*, and from there people told me that I should maybe see if that was not literature, to interest somebody in publication. . . .

If I had to tell somebody that would like to write what to do, it's very difficult. Sometimes people just write, like that. But somebody that would just want to begin, I don't know how to begin it. But the first thing, to me, is to live, to breathe, to look at . . . not at the paper and not at the book, look at things.

. . . So, for whom do I write? I don't have any audience that I am conscious of in my head because my first goal in writing is to get conscious of my own thinking, my view of things. And sometimes I go too fast and I have to rewrite it to get at it, to feel that I am living, to actually know that I am living. As I am singer, too, I feel that that's different, because when I write a song I feel an audience. I know that it will be in that kind of place. But, in literature, it's completely different for me. . . . It's so difficult to explain.

If I was teaching, maybe the first thing I would tell my students is that, in literature, one book has many writers. It has the writer that has signed it—and all the readers. The readers are writing when they are reading. You can compare it to a conversation. Sometimes you're hearing, you're understanding, you're listening to somebody but you're still talking somewhere in your head. When you read or you're writing, there is a voice of yourself going through that book. . . . So I would like that every reader be conscious of that, that they are writing and that what they live during their reading is, as well, the fact of literature. Literature is not a book closed with no reader. It's a book that is like being in conversation with a reader and re-writing like that. That's the life of a book.

. . . When I read Anne Hébert I was maybe sixteen or seventeen and I was not knowing at all that I would be a writer, but as a student I was discussing the sense of being a writer in Québec. We were analysing poetry and things like that. I had the impression that we had no literature. There was no sense in writing. . . . And with Saint-Denys Garneau, in poetry, it

was the first writer that I find out, well, there is a language, there is a form that I can identify like being from here. And then Anne Hébert came with *Les chambres de bois* and with *Le Torrent*, and it was great for me to read that. That gave me the attitude that we could come out with a new form, a new style with that language, that country. And it was something very strong there, so it influenced me because maybe I was like any Québécois Canadian, who thinks that we have no literature. And there I was finding out that we had one, and that was very good for me when I read it. So it was very important. . . .

. . . I came to live in France three years ago. I think it was absolutely necessary to take that distance. It's very good for me from that point of view to see Québec, because when you are always in the same family, maybe all of a sudden you have no distance anymore to look even at an individual. So, from here, it's like a new instrument in science. If you have a new microscope, it influences, of course, but how this new microscope influences what you're looking at you'll see maybe after the experience. First of all, you see what you're trying to analyse.

I'll try to tell you how Laura Laur became *Laura Laur*. It's a long story that I'll make short. . . . I saw . . . a woman . . . alone but living very deeply and intensely inside other people. Her life, her own life, was in other people, and I began to try to write that. It was not clear at all in the beginning. . . . And there was another thing that was really interesting for me. When I was young, often it would happen that you would meet a group of men talking about the same woman in the village, one woman. She would catch the attention and she would live as a symbol. (I'm not talking about sexual symbol.) And Laura Laur was a kind of girl like that at the beginning, but the more I was writing, the more she was becoming that kind of girl. And at the end, I realized that I was, again, trying to explain that a woman has to move in a specific way to find out how she would breathe in the social thing, in politics. . . . It's just a story of that girl.

Laura Laur—she frightened some people. Some other people love her, some other people hate her. She—she fascinates. Most of the readers told me that it was, above all, a kind of a vibration. It comes from the writing. There is a kind of a vibration that comes from the body to them, from the book to them. . . . Laura is a mysterious woman, but very concrete, too. She has . . . that kind of a tension of being nowhere, . . . but she's acting very concretely. So I think that tension is probably fascinating. And those men love her. Maybe some readers will not think the same thing. I wrote it. I feel it. You know, I try to show it that those four men love Laura and that she lives really strongly inside of them. And maybe some women would say, yes, but Gilles, for example, well, he doesn't love her. . . . Each reader knows what he feels, but I feel it's as a lover.

People ask me in interviews why I wrote from a man's point of view that novel, *Laura Laur.* Maybe it's because—because I am an hysterical woman. You know, it's a good quality for a writer to be hysterical because when you are hysterical in discipline, you always feel the situation. You can almost have the thoughts of the other inside of you.

When I say hysterical behavior, . . . it's not really psychological . . . for me; it's discipline, a way of working things in life. So to get to Laura Laur, I had to hear from those men. Those men represent not only a lover, an individual lover, but they represent the social. . . . One is, you know, an artisan, the other one is . . . how do you call it? . . . socialized . . . a straight person. And the other two, they represent their field. And I had to see Laura trying to come in and not fitting there.

. . . And there was another thing. I see Laura as a kind of delinquent. I don't want to say that she *is* a delinquent, but it's, for me, a kind of delinquent. And delinquent is not looked at the same way by women and by men. It's a complete different story. So I think I'm now trying to write another delinquent story from a woman's point of view. The women are the mother, and the mother controls girls in a different way, so it makes a different book completely, something else. . . .

Maybe teachers will show that I was always writing the same thing and always writing on

the same theme. I feel that how people are connected to social fields, how an individual is connected to the social, is one of the main themes in my life. How you get your autonomy. And as a woman, of course, it's a complete different problem, a new problem, an interesting problem. Because women have to connect to all those realities—economic, political, social—in a different way than men. And history tells us how. . . .

from **LAURA LAUR**

My name is Jean. I'm Laur's brother. I speak slowly. I'm a weak person. I don't have the powerful forces inside me that send some people rushing to their fate like fire engines to a fire. I put on the brakes. I resist the tremendous speed of things around me. I'm paralyzed by fast-moving crowds. I don't have a car and I can't stand big cities, where sudden and incomprehensible bursts of speed carry people from one intersection to the next. I'm a simple person. I think mostly about trees and heavy rocks. I earn my living with wood and stone. I work with my hands. Apart from my work, I see myself as a big glacier left over from ancient times, gradually melting away in some quiet, sheltered spot in the mountains. That's the way Laur liked to see me.

There's always gossip in a small town like Amos. Our mother was never a gossipmonger, and we eventually believed a town like Amos didn't have any gossip. But it does. Our town isn't dead.

Someone saw Laur, my sister, in the botanic garden in Montreal on a Sunday morning about eleven o'clock. Someone from Amos. They couldn't wait to go and have coffee at the Café Radio as soon as they got back to Amos. Adding milk and sugar, they told whoever would listen that Laur had been huddled on a bench under the statue of Brother Marie-Victorin, that she looked sick, that she was all by herself and that she stared accusingly at everybody who came to see the statue, with that scornful, hateful look of hers.

I find it difficult to express myself. It takes me a long time. Most often, I don't have time to finish my sentences, because things happen so fast. But one thing I've got to say—Laur couldn't accuse or despise anyone. If their eyes met Laur's, scornful people could get the feeling Laur despised them. Also, people who lie—I mean people who lie to themselves without knowing it—could think Laur was accusing them when she looked at them. It's nothing to do with Laur, but it's held against her.

. . . . . .

I don't know where Laur is. I only hear about her through the stories that travel across 350 kilometres of forest before they finally get this far north, where they're told to the customers at the Café Radio. We're not far from Hudson Bay here. There is plenty of time, as lakes and rivers go by, for the stories to be repeated, forgotten or improved on. Our mother always wanted to ignore the gossipmongers. Sometimes I get the feeling I'd like to call them liars and set the facts straight. But I'm too much of a coward. Or maybe not worth noticing. There are a lot of active people around. They're waiting for a leader, like a union chief with strong charisma, to come along and organize them. They're restless. Among them, boors like me become invisible. I live by myself out on the point of land near the rapids. I walk along the main street and First Avenue once or twice a day. I have a beer at the Château or at The Queen. And I listen. I think children are afraid of me. People call me "*her* brother." Someone saw Laur in the lobby of the Four Seasons. So the story goes. Someone saw Laur having an intimate dinner with a middle-aged man in the Pierre de

Coubertin dining room. Laur was laughing with this "rich fellow she'd found herself." She was laughing so loudly she disturbed everyone else. Gossip. People hide their true thoughts behind stories and gossip. It's only natural. If people said what they really thought, they'd have nothing left to say to each other. As for me, I don't have many thoughts. But from what I hear as years go by, it's best that people disguise or hide or water down their thoughts. That way they're able to keep talking to each other. It's what comes from being sociable. I say that, but really I'm just repeating the lesson Laur taught me without saying a word. Everything I say I learned from Laur. Laur believed the buzzing of society is the same everywhere. It's no different here. We have pride. Sociologists would be wasting their time if they came up here to laugh at us. We know what's going on in civilization. Everything. We may be in the north, and 350 kilometres of forest away from civilization, but we still know what's happening. It would be a mistake to think the latest designs don't get this far north.

I don't know if people felt Laur condemned them. If they felt they weren't good enough for her. Or if they believed that's what she thought. If they believed that, I've got to set the facts straight. Laur condemned herself. I'm no psychologist or sociologist, moralist or parish priest. I give shape to wood and stone. I work with my hands. I love wood and the time I spend with wood. I love its sound and its many textures. I touch it and it speaks to me. Some wood has been lying quietly for hundreds of years deep under rushing water. I know Laur condemned herself. Her only fault was that she sparkled. Her own brilliance made her angry, but there wasn't anything she could do about it. Sometimes she'd punish herself by shutting herself away. When she left town everyone was relieved. But the light in Amos was never the same once Laur was gone. Maybe that's why people in Amos bear Laur a grudge. And why, when they get back from a trip to Montreal, they can't wait to get to the Café Radio on First Avenue and tell everyone they've seen her.

. . . . . .

Things began to go badly for Laur when she believed the fellow from the garage. It had to happen. Laur was always like that. She wanted to see everything. We were supposed to wait for father outside, but we sneaked inside to see the mechanics at work. Laur caught sight of the small, steep stairway behind the oil barrels. The word "Private" was written clearly on the wall in red paint. There was a closed hatch at the top of the stairs. Laur raised it with her head. It opened into a kind of attic, crammed with scrap iron, barrels, tools and pieces of rope. There were man-traps, and there was a rifle. Under the window was a wooden board supported by old butter crates, which served as a workbench. Mechanical parts were everywhere. A bunch of dead daisies were stuck in a vise.

"Can't you read?"

The voice from down below was cold. Laur said nothing. An engine roared somewhere beneath us. Casings and tools scraped as they were shoved aside, and the owner of the voice appeared out of the darkness. He was an older boy, about sixteen or seventeen. He was playing with the large iron file he held in his hands.

"Little girls don't belong here. They talk too much."

"If I were you, I wouldn't have said anything yet," Laur replied.

They looked each other square in the face. Laur told me to go back down, find father, and tell him she had gone ahead on foot.

She came home late for dinner.

"Where have you been?" father asked.

"Where I felt like being."

"Go to your room," father said.

"I haven't got a room. They're all yours."

He slapped her face. She thanked him and went upstairs.

"I'm not blocking your view, am I?"

The blonde did not wait for an answer. She turned back to face the screen. Her hair would tickle Gilles' lips if he did not take a step back. Another surge of the small tightly-packed crowd. Gilles found himself right next to the girl. A girl, or a woman—there is a certain perfume.

Would you care to dance? The foolish words rose to his lips and hovered there for a few moments before he swallowed them. Too old-fashioned. He had not known the names of dances for quite a while. The video presentation was almost finished. The small crowd would break up. The dance would be over. Just one move and she would be pressed against him; he would be holding her.

"What do you think of it?" she asked. He looked to see whether she was talking to him. She was. "Were you talking to me?" he asked. "Who else?" she replied.

She said that personally she loved cars. All kinds of cars. He thought: Would you care to dance? Too old-fashioned. What do you say to the young women of today? How do you court them? Too old-fashioned. He said, "And why do you like cars so much?" He thought how out of touch he was. Over fifty. A fifty-gun salute, fifty candles, and Agnes' approval. We're so old. She said, "I love speed. It kills."

"There's quite a crowd," commented Gilles.

"Yes, it's a great success."

He was sorry he had said what he had. He could have been more direct. He thought: make love. He thought how he always had been too direct. He would open his mouth and she would see the teeth of a vampire. . . . He laughed. He asked if she ever entered rallies. She looked at him.

"I love speed, but I can't afford it. I watch others."

It had been so long since he had made love with a woman. . . . And what about women? Young women? Do they let themselves be led, or do you have to let them lead? If she thinks about the price of cars, maybe she thinks about politics too.

They really did seem to be dancing. The crowd was pushing them along, swaying slowly. He would put his arms around the narrow shoulders, the head would lean against his chest, the hair would tickle his face, and the lights would dim.

"Can I buy you a drink?"

"What do you mean by that?"

What does she think I mean? That I want to pick her up?

Me? I just thought she might like to go for a car ride. Since she likes cars. We could have gone for a drink. Agnes never had any interest in cars. Just as well. It's better for women not to take an interest in cars. Otherwise, they might start discussing politics too, and there'd be no end to it.

"I have an old friend waiting for me down in the parking lot. I'd like you to meet her."

Gilles was using his imagination. He was being original. He was no longer asking someone to dance at a night club. Now he was introducing women to his old Jag. The thought of his old friend, his old green Jaguar, disturbed him. Old and bottle-green. She was following him. She even allowed herself to be led through the crowd to the exit, then to the elevator. She said, "On Sunday and Monday, I read the reports of traffic deaths in the papers."

"Really?" said Gilles. His heart leaped with joy when the elevator door opened. Crowded. "According to the papers, just as many people die at slow speed as at high speed. I find that quite interesting." He had felt her warm breath and inhaled her perfume. He gave a foolish laugh. He watched the numbers for each floor light up.

Today, driving down Rue Pie-IX in the drizzle, Gilles wondered again whether Laura had not staged the whole thing. She had started telling him about herself in a voice he had never heard her use before. She lay on top of him and he held her close, straining to hear her breathless voice. "Where I was born . . . ," she said. "Where I was born," she began again, "the sounds of war are never heard. Some people where I was born don't know the sounds of war or starvation or torture. Where I was born, no idea is worth torture, starvation or war. There is a river, with people along it and all they do is chew. Meat and grass change to people and people change to meat and grass, and the sounds of war never reach them. You understand. Do you understand why fish isn't meat? Not meat, but flesh? Gilles, you know why . . . where I was born. You nearly killed me. You've understood since then. I didn't know how you were going to do it. Waiting was the worst part. Where I was born, it's like that. The vastness, and so many stars—it's beautiful. But suddenly the beauty is awful. It's irritating. People want something to do, they're so bored just chewing. It's good that you're happy, Gilles. I'm telling you everything. I'm telling you all about myself, and you think it's wonderful. You don't see yourself any more as a fifty-year-old man who has to get the ice ready for the martinis. I don't think you think about that at all any more. But I didn't mean you to stop thinking about it. I didn't want that. I didn't plan it. Where I was born, there were games afterward for entertainment. People played at finding the limits of the intolerable. They tried to see how far they could go. I have seen them, people and animals, go beyond the limits, ignoring the worst cries. You know, Gilles, back there where I was born, but never grew up, it was boredom that gave rise to torture. So . . ."

So. . . . So what? She did not know.

FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DISCUSSION

1. Suzanne Jacob remarks, "If I was teaching, maybe the first thing I would tell my students is that, in literature, one book has many writers. It has the writer that has signed it—and all the readers. The readers are writing when they are reading." What does she mean by this?

   In what ways do you "write" a book that you are reading?

2. Laura Laur fascinates people who read about her. Some love her, some hate her, others are frightened by her. Why is this so?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Laura Laur is a heroine whom the author describes as "a woman . . . alone but living very deeply and intensely inside other people." Would you agree?

2. What is the nature of the relationship between Laura Laur and the four men she knows? Do they love her? Why are they attracted to her?

3. Suzanne Jacob remarks in the interview, "I feel that how people are connected to social fields, how an individual is connected to the social, is one of the main themes in my life." Discuss this with reference to *Laura Laur*.

RELEVANT WORKS

Jacob, Suzanne. *Flore Cocon*. Montréal: Parti Pris. 1978. Roman.

_____. *Laura Laur*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983. Roman.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Suzanne Jacob says of herself:

"I was born in Amos, in Abitibi. I spent my childhood there. Hockey, election campaigns, and Easter celebrations were my central interests. Later I went on to study at the College Notre Dame de l'Assomption in Nicolet. The college was more like a cultural centre than like any of the other colleges. Theatre, violin, and the cine-club took up most of my time until graduation.

"I ended up in Montreal trying to reconcile theatre with the Faculty of Literature. I found myself next in Jasper, Alberta. Eight months later I was on a cargo ship heading to Europe. A year later, I was married and pregnant. I returned to Montreal with my son and began to do theatre. And I have continued like this, writing and singing.

"Well, in any case, both of my grandmothers were real characters; I must have inherited something from them.

"What else? In 1978, I published my first novel, *Flore Cocon*, with Parti Pris. *La Survie*, a collection of my short stories, was published in 1979 by Biocreux, a publishing house that I founded with friends. I continued to write scripts for Radio Québec—"The Wall," among others—and make contributions to various publications.

"As for singing, after two albums, I have just gone through a major turnaround. I am working now with electric/acoustic music. It's new, wonderful and exciting . . . and different!"

A conversation with

ROBERT KROETSCH

The aspen parklands are the country of my imagination. The area that I write about especially is 150 kilometres southeast of Edmonton. It's close to the Battle River. It's very rich farmland. It's a very rural kind of area. . . . This area was settled by settlers of German descent from the midwest of the United States. Heisler was settled by people of German descent from Ontario. They naturally intermarried, and it turned out that my mother was from the Spring Lake area. My father was from the Heisler area. They farmed south of Heisler. . . . I'm forever, I suppose, imprinted by the clouds, the fields, the trees, even the roads, the sense of space. . . . Somehow or other, this landscape is a source for me. It's a place of origin. It's a place of beginning. This is where stories begin for me.

. . . Heisler, Alberta, is the town I write about, and will go on writing about, I expect. This town exists, first of all, because of wheat. My father was a wheat farmer, and he used to bring wheat to be sold at the elevators. But the town was much more to me. It was there that I learned what story is; it's there that I learned what dancing is; it's there that I really learned what community is. We came to Heisler from the farm to be with each other, to play cards, to talk. I came there to go to school. I came there to play hockey. It was the community centre where I learned, finally, what poetry is.

When I was a kid, the place where we met girls was the dance hall. But I had a special problem in that most of the girls were my cousins. Our families had come out west from Ontario together, so we were all first cousins, second cousins, and it was a long time before I met a girl who wasn't my cousin. Or at least it seemed like a long time to me. I met her in Lassu's store, which, at the time, was the Canada Cafe, a Chinese restaurant. And it was in the restaurant, sitting in the booth there, that we learned to flirt with girls.

. . . Once upon a time, I was sixteen years old, and I weighed 156 pounds. And I played first base for the Heisler Cardinals, and I didn't care the least bit about poetry. What I wanted to do was to play ball all day on the ball diamond, and dance all night in the dance hall beyond the ball diamond. And that's what I thought was paradise, and I was happy.

. . . The original Heisler Hotel burned down in 1919. In 1925, my father and his brother decided to give up homesteading for a little while and try their hand at business. So they hauled bricks by oxen from Daysland, and they built the Heisler Hotel. They quickly discovered they preferred homesteading to business, but the hotel stayed on as the centre for the community. It's there that people gathered in the evening to tell stories, to talk with each other, to lie a bit, brag a bit, make business deals, to avoid work, I suppose. And it was in this hotel that I heard many of the stories that I've written down over the past few years.

Even though I don't live in the area anymore, I still think of it as home. . . . I was in Italy last winter and, looking at that landscape, I realized how much the [aspen parkland] landscape means to me. . . . My mother was born in the area, and she had a very strong sense of landscape, of place, of the birds, and the flowers and the plants. She communicated that to me when I was a child. I think that was basic to my writing, that sense of place that my mother communicated to me. So, even now, the open fields, the poplar bluffs, the big farms, with their lovely old barns, still speak in my writing. They're very much a part of my imagination, of what I think a poem is.

I rode a horse to school for eleven years—four and a half miles between Heisler and the farm I lived on. I was the worst horseman in Flaggstaff County. One time, I fell off a horse that was standing still. Another time I fell off after I dropped my lunch pail. A couple of times I upset a cutter because I happened to hit the gate while turning into the schoolyard. Most of the time, I was looking around, dreaming. Perhaps I was getting ready to write a poem about a country road.

. . . Where is home exactly? I can pinpoint the place where I was born. It's the northeast quarter, section seventeen, township forty-two, range sixteen, west of the fourth meridian. So that was how my father found his homestead. I was born there in his homestead shack while the big house was being built. That was June, 1927.

When I was a kid, the yard was always full of horses. We had about thirty head of horses that we farmed with, and there were a lot of machines around, lots of wagons, lots of hired men. And the hired men had a great deal of contempt for me because I was such a lousy farmer. As a farmer, I seemed to be just about useless, but I was a great gardener. Behind the house, we had a big garden, and I would help my mother. After she died, when I was about thirteen, I took over the gardening, and I planted all the trees around the house. My father thought that was quite ridiculous because he had spent a great deal of his life cutting trees down, and there I was, planting them again. Also, at that time, various of my aunts would come and help out at the farm, and they had a big influence on me, as storytellers. These aunts of mine would tell me family history, homesteading history, things like that. And through them, I came into contact with the stories of this area, this place.

. . . My Dad never disapproved of my going up to my room to write whenever there was work to do, but he was certainly puzzled by it. When I look back, he was incredibly tolerant. He didn't realize that it was sort of a disgraceful thing to set out to be a writer. I was, at least, not burdened with that middle-class pressure from parents who want you to do something else. So, I was encouraged to go on writing. But I don't think my Dad had the foggiest notion what I was doing, and he criticized my first stories because they never seemed to end. He wanted different endings on them.

Real work was considered to be manual work in this area. And, since I was a fairly big guy, the oldest child, and the only son, I was expected to do real work. Instead, I worked with a pencil or a typewriter, and people didn't quite think of that as real work. My uncle Freddy was at the farm one day. He came in and caught me taking notes or trying to write a story, and he said, "I guess that pencil's pretty heavy." He thought that wasn't quite work, either. . . . As I say, I had, in a strange way, a very privileged upbringing. I was left quite alone. Farm people have to work quite hard; they're very busy; so I was left alone to my own devices. I lived very much in my imagination. I suppose I liked doing jobs where I would be alone, like gardening, or fixing the fence—that sort of thing. I often did jobs that the men, the hired men, didn't like to do, because they would have to be alone when they did them. . . . In "Seed Catalogue," I talk about an incident where I was beginning a poem, and my father said, the next time I started a poem, he would start the haying. That was one thing I did have to help with.

. . . I have four sisters, and I'm not sorry that we sold the farm after my father died. In a strange way, by not owning it, I possess all of it. It becomes the stuff of my imagination, the stuff of my writing. So mere possession doesn't matter in the face of that larger involvement.

Since I was the only son, it was, in a sense, my responsibility to decide whether or not we went on farming it. It was a very difficult decision for us to make. We had a very happy childhood. My father had come west from Ontario, wanting to be a big farmer, and he had become a big farmer. He was sometimes puzzled by those of us who couldn't decide what to do, because he had decided as a boy of seventeen. But we finally did decide that we wouldn't keep the land, the farm, the home place, and I don't think any of us has really regretted it.

. . . Perhaps my sense of the mystery of the Battle River valley was based on an awareness of its Indian past, because along this valley the Cree and the Blackfoot fought over territory, wood, water, buffalo. The Battle River's been legendary for hundreds of years in the history of the region. You can still find many arrowheads. You still find stone hammers, on occasion. As a child, I suppose I still encountered the ghosts of the big chiefs, Big Knife, people like that, who had lived in this valley a long time before the ranchers came from Ontario and the States. . . . In a way, this valley shaped my sense of universe.

The flatland, which is carefully mapped out by farmers, suddenly breaks, and you get wild country down below that level. Down in the valley, the people seemed to be less afflicted by the work ethic. They spent time poaching a deer once in a while, or catching fish. There were coal miners who only worked in the wintertime. They would make moonshine. They somehow lived freer lives than we did, up on the flatland. We were more inclined to spend our time working hard, and I suppose my sympathies were often with the poets living in the valley.

. . . I think art always happens on borders, on peripheries. It's just like the sloughs. All of the birds are working the edges of the slough, and it's the same with art. Art happens on edges. And I think Alberta is a beautiful land of edges. We are on all kinds of edges as artists right now; that's why we're making films; we're writing poems; we're writing novels. It's that periphery, that edge where you take chances, where you live. Centres have got everything decided for themselves. They have a kind of confidence and they stop guessing, and they stop gambling, and we on the edge are very much willing to gamble, to take chances. We have huge problems, and we want to make reckless attempts at working them out. Risk is important in art making. And, in a place like Alberta, it's just full of risk, and that's why I am an Albertan—in that profound sense that one is a risk taker.

. . . I lived in the States for twenty years as a writer, and I wrote about Canada all that time. I felt I had to come back to Canada to reconfront my material. And it was quite a shock when I came back, because I had left a very rural world, and I came back to a very urban Canada. I had to rethink the stories I wanted to tell. And I suppose that's what I'm engaged in doing right now, trying to decide, trying to discover how you tell the story of an urban people.

. . . Growing up, I felt incredibly isolated. And I think that's one reason why I was very slow to start writing. There didn't seem to be other writers around. Of course, that's changed very radically since then, too. At the same time, I suppose one presumed to become the tradition. . . . I guess we like the feeling of being rebels, or underground writers, or isolated figures although, ironically, that all turns into a tradition before it's over.

. . . I owe a debt to W.O. Mitchell. I read his *Jake and the Kid* stories when I was a kid, and discovered you could make stories out of hired men. We had a yard full of hired, and I had never once thought of writing about those people. So, Mitchell showed me where my material was. I also owe a debt to Hugh MacLennan, the first Canadian novelist I had read. He had made such a great use of Montreal, Quebec, and so on, that I was challenged to make an equivalent use of the prairies. I also read Sinclair Ross, *As for Me and My House*. And Ross gives a very grim picture of the thirties. I had been a child during the thirties, and I remembered the kind of wild energy that saw people through. I wrote a novel, trying to capture some of that energy, as opposed to, say, Ross who had this quite different view of the world. The person who really influenced me, I suppose, was Emily Carr, who was a painter rather than a writer. But she saw how to make art out of this violently new landscape, and I learned a great deal from her pictures of the West Coast, the forests, the Indian villages.

. . . In a sense, we grew up in an unmapped world. There seemed to be no written stories. I was a great reader as a kid, and there didn't seem to be any stories about this place, and then I found these writers. And now, I suppose I'm much more influenced by my contemporaries, George Bowering, a friend who influences me, [Michael] Ondaatje, Daphne Marlatt.

. . . Alberta's a kingdom, in a sense, within the country. It has a very special flavor of its own, and I suppose people are not wrong when they say I'm an Albertan writer. At the same time, I think of myself very passionately as a Canadian writer. It's only by being local, it's only by capturing this valley that we speak to the whole country. I think that's the paradox: that by capturing the particular exactly, we make a universal statement. There's no such thing as a universal statement, per se: you only speak to a lot of people by getting it right—right where you are.

from **STONE HAMMER POEM**

1.

This stone
become a hammer
of stone, this maul

is the colour
of bone (no,
bone is the colour
of this stone maul).

6.

This stone maul
stopped a plow
long enough for one
Gott im Himmel.

The Blackfoot (the
Cree?) not

finding the maul
cursed.

?did he curse
?did he try to
go back
?what happened
I have to/I want
to know (not know)
?WHAT HAPPENED

from **SEED CATALOGUE**

How do you grow a poet?

This is a prairie road.
This road is the shortest distance
between nowhere and nowhere.
This road is a poem.

Just two miles up the road
you'll find a porcupine
dead in the ditch. It was
trying to cross the road.

As for the poet himself
we can find no record
of his having traversed
the land/in either direction

no trace of his coming
or going/only a scarred
page, a spoor of wording
a reduction to mere black

and white/a pile of rabbit
turds that tell us
all spring long
where the track was

poet . . . say uncle.

FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DISCUSSION

1. What are some of the things that the stone hammer signifies in "Stone Hammer Poem"?

2. In "Seed Catalogue," how is a gopher a model for a prairie town?

3. In the same poem, why might Kroetsch say "This road is a poem"? Why is the "spoor of wording" referred to as a "reduction to mere black/and white"?

4. In the interview, the author says, "There's no such thing as a universal statement, per se: you only speak to a lot of people by getting it right—right where you are." What do you think he means by this?

5. Kroetsch also says, "Somehow or other, this landscape [the aspen parklands] is a source for me. It's a place of origin. It's a place of beginning. This is where stories begin for me." Why is place important to this writer?

6. Robert Kroetsch once remarked to Margaret Lawrence, "We haven't got any identity until somebody tells our story. The fiction makes us real" ("Creation," 1970). How might telling the story of a certain place such as the aspen parklands give the people who live there an identity?

   Would you agree that telling their story makes them more "real"?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. "Seed Catalogue" is a poem that is made up of a collection of shorter poems. Although Kroetsch does not use these to tell a story, the short poems still seem to be part of the whole poem. How are they linked together? What alternatives to narrative structure does the poet use?

2. "Seed Catalogue" has been described as a meditation on the cultivation of poetry. If the subject is the cultivation of poetry, why would Kroetsch choose such a title?

RELEVANT WORKS

Kroetsch, Robert, ed. *Creation*. Toronto: New Press, 1970. 213 p. Consists of excerpts from the works of Robert Kroetsch, James Bacque, and Pierre Gravel, followed by "critical dialogues." Includes some text in French.

_____. *The Stone Hammer Poems, 1960-1975*. 2nd ed. Lantzville, B.C.: Oolichan Books, 1976. 64 p.

_____. *Seed Catalogue: Poems*. 2nd ed. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1977. 70 p. illus.

_____. *Field Notes: 1 - 8 a continuing poem: The Collected Poetry of Robert Kroetsch*. Don Mills, Ont.: General Publishing, 1981. 144 p. illus. Preface by Eli Mandel. Includes "Seed Catalogue" and "Stone Hammer Poem."

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

About himself, Robert Kroetsch says:

"I was born on a farm near Heisler, Alberta, June 26, 1927. After graduating from the University of Alberta [1948], I worked for six years in the Canadian North—on riverboats on the Mackenzie River, on a construction site on Hudson Bay, for the United States Air Force in Labrador.

"I returned to my studies in 1954. After receiving my Ph.D in 1961 [from the University of Iowa], I worked for seventeen years as a professor at the State University of New York at Binghamton. In 1978, I came to the University of Manitoba as Professor of Canadian Literature.

"I've published seven novels, seven books of poetry, a travel book called *Alberta*, a volume of journal entries, and a volume of critical statements.

"My third novel, *The Studhorse Man*, received the Governor General's Award for Fiction [1969]."

A conversation with

PATRICK LANE

I was born in 1939, in Nelson, British Columbia. My home life was a good one when I was a child. My father was away in the war during the first six years of my life. I don't remember missing him, probably because he just wasn't there. When he returned from the war, we moved to Vernon, British Columbia and the home life continued to be good. There was always literature around; there was always reading. My mother was very interested in books, interested in reading aloud to us as children. When I was a boy, I wanted to be an artist, which probably meant that I wanted to be a painter, rather than a writer. When I was small, I worked at coloring books, and made drawings and things like that. But art was encouraged around the home. It was a natural part of our home life.

I didn't learn a lot in school. I was a bit of a rebel all through school. . . . I finished school in Grade Twelve (I was married by that time), and immediately went to work in the bush, the hill country, the backcountry, sawmills, logging camps, ranches. I was a shepherd at one time; I was just about everything you could think of, a different job every six months. I mean, a mill would shut down, and you'd move to another town, and get another job.

. . . When I first started writing poetry, I had really no interest in writing prose. I was a fairly romantic young man, and my brother was writing at the time. . . . He was a poet, my brother Red Lane, and he died in 1964. I'd begun writing in and around the same time he did, and poetry was the thing I started with. It was the thing I had the most facility with, and also, I got some recognition from it. People liked what I wrote, so I stayed with the poetry. I've never been able to write prose very successfully. I turn into a bit of a pedant, a bit of an intellectual. I can't write imaginatively in prose. I find it very dull, stolid, hard work. Boring work, at least. Prose writers of the world watch out! Poetry really is my love; it's what I love doing more than anything else.

. . . The first book I ever published was published in Vancouver, and that was in about 1966. . . . I'd moved to Vancouver from the mountains and met people like bill bissett, Seymour Mayne, John Newlove, all kinds of people. Three or four of us started a small publishing company because there was nowhere in Canada to publish a book at that time. There were the big Eastern publishers, but they only published in the East—if they published anybody at all. So, we just decided to start our own publishing house and, of course, the first books we published were our own. That was the secret reason we began it, and then, once our books were out, we went on and published a lot of other writers around Vancouver.

I didn't have any direct influences when I began writing poetry. As far as I was concerned, there were no living poets around; they didn't exist. Consequently, I began absolutely fresh, with the idea that I could write a poem. Then I very quickly began reading Canadian poets—Irving Layton, Raymond Souster—books that had been published in the fifties. It's strange now, trying to remember who I was at that time. In a sense, I'm inventing that whole world; I guess that's what all writers do. I began inventing a world when I began writing. Those writers were inventing a world as well. It wasn't anything to do with reality; it was a concocted world.

Poets basically write one or two poems all their lives: the same poem, in all of its endless variations. You go back to the same things that concern you. What those themes are, what the concept of the poems I try to write is, I'm not really sure. I'm a little bewildered by that. . . . but I go back and back to the same kinds of things. Images recur over and over again, images of struggle, and images of violence.

I'm not particularly fascinated by violence; it's just that I grew up in a very violent world. In the West, there's a very natural, violent world; animals live, animals die.

And farmers, ranchers in the bush, people in the mines, in the mills. Death and dismemberment and that sort of thing. That was normal; that was daily. People get their hands cut off; that's what happens when you're in the sawmills. No one thought anything about that. That was as natural as shooting a deer or killing a cow—you do that. There's a whole other world that develops in cities, where you're sort of separated from death. I mean, people do the deaths for you, and you feed off them vicariously. Chicken, in the city, comes in a plastic bag; chicken, in the country, or the small towns where I grew up, was an animal that walked around, and you cut its head off and ate it. It's a totally different kind of reality. I was, I think, very involved in death, and the renewal that comes at death. So, I guess, to some degree, that may be one of the themes of my work.

. . . Landscape becomes a pervasive part of a writer's world. You dig into your landscape, just like you dig into your life. In other words, you can't separate a man from the land he lives on; it's really as simple as that. The land itself is the frame for your writing; the poems you write are created through the hills, the trees, the valleys. . . . It doesn't make you narrowly regional. It just means that you build your world out of the world you live in, as poets in England, or poets in Europe, did.

People are always trying to pigeonhole you; they're trying to categorize you all the time. They want to make me into a mountain poet, or make me into a redneck poet. They want to isolate everyone, all the time. There is an endless concern in this country to regionalize the writer, in a sense, to bring him down to terms that they can cope with. That may be a Canadian problem, because we're made up of such a huge half continent. But it's too easy, and it's too glib. We don't say that about the Lake Poets in England; we don't say that about other people. In a sense, I suppose I am a redneck poet. I come from the working class, and I come from the stock of Western people. People in the East will categorize them all as rednecks. What does that mean? They're all uncivilized people? That's simply nonsense. In an odd way, I'm very proud of it, and I wrote a long poem about it, in which I talked precisely about where I'd come from as a redneck. I mean, we landed in the Jamestown settlements [in the early 1600s]. We've been on this continent for 500 years. Let's get serious about who writers are.

My reading habits, as a writer, are interesting . . . interesting to me, anyway. Oddly, as I get older, I go back to writers that I learned a great deal from—not simply just learning technique and style and ways of writing but, because they affected me, I think, emotionally and spiritually. And I go back to them now very fondly. I'm interested in new writers, younger writers . . . I'm part of a long continuing line of writers, poets if you like. And when the young poets coming along start writing, they are continuing on the same sort of unfolding process. I like to read what they write because their styles are different than mine; their concerns are different; they're growing up in a different kind of world. So, I love that as well. Particular writers I like—they change with the seasons. Sometimes, I'll read European poetry; I'll go through a two- or three-year period where I'm fascinated by works in translation. And then I'll come back and read American writers, or endlessly go back and read the Canadians that I love deeply. Most of them are my peers—men and women that I grew up with—John Newlove, Dorothy Livesay, Margaret Atwood, Alden Nowlan. They're writers who deeply influenced me when I was writing. Many of us learned together, and you were aware that they were growing along with you. They were going different ways, different kinds of writing. It felt good to have them out there, so I go back to them many times. Also, I think the writers I just mentioned are very sweet, sweet writers.

. . . we were the first generation to really try to articulate what this country was. That's not taking anything away from the earlier writers. But we were uniquely and privately Canadian, and conscious of a national vision that was extremely special, and a lot of that came from Western Canada. . . . we sort of named the new country that had never really been named before; we named it in poetry and prose and, in a sense, that's what the whole country has done for me. As a generation, I think we're somehow special.

The first piece of advice I would give to a young writer is to learn how to write. So many young writers have this assumption, particularly in poetry, that somehow anyone, if they feel committed, can write a poem. It just doesn't work that way. Given the fact that you've talent and imagination, and have a creative impulse, it's still a long process. It's a long procedure. It takes years to learn how to write a good poem. It's not easy. I think anyone who tries that, knows that. . . . After that, I'd tell them to read. I'd say, read and read and read. Read other writers, and learn from them, not just human concerns, but the critical and structural concerns that make you a writer. You're not going to write like them, but you'll apply the same kinds of things to your own writing. Writing doesn't change that much, regardless of the various movements and schools. Things don't change. Things have never changed; they're the same. They've always been the same. All that changes is the people who write down the old stories all over again, and they've got to learn how to write down these new stories for themselves.

I would prefer it if people didn't think of me as a writer at all. I hate being thought of as a writer. There's a kind of . . . thing about writers; they become more important than their stories or their poems. I'd much prefer that people didn't know a lot about me, but that they knew a lot about my work. That's the important thing. My private life, my biography, is not the important thing. Somehow, I get the terrified feeling that knowing there's a writer out there is good enough—you don't have to read anything that he himself does. A lot of people come to me after readings and say, "We loved what you did," and then they don't buy a book! And you wonder what world they are involved in. After all, the world is the world of the poems, not whether I stand up, walk, lie down, sleep—that's none of their business.

I wrote the poem, "Elephants," almost ten years after the event it tries to describe. One of the first jobs I ever had, after I left school, after I had a family to support, was driving cat [caterpillar tractor] on the Rogers Pass. They were building the Rogers Pass highway, and there was a camp right near Craig [Craigellachie], where the last spike was driven in the railway. During the day, it would run two or three shifts. They were really trying to push, to get that highway completed. . . . Quite often, you'd be sitting around all day doing nothing, just waiting for the next shift to start, so you could go back to work. You could spend so much time in a bunkhouse; you could spend so much time in a cookshack . . . there wasn't anything to do. I used to sit around a lot. There were some Native people who lived in the area. Sometimes, their kids would come wandering by, and I'd talk to them. That was really all that was involved in the event.

There are always critical moments that happen in a person's life, and working there was critical for me, because it was the first really formal job I had as a man, as a provider, and I was kind of isolated there. Years and years later, I thought about that. It's one of those kinds of images that a writer has in the back of his mind; he thinks about it and thinks about it and, finally, a poem starts. I began the poem by just describing the world I was in. I got through the first half of the poem, and suddenly there was an Indian kid talking to me, and then the imagination took over. Sometimes I used to carve animals out of bars of soap . . . there was the kid; I gave him this [soap] elephant; the story developed, and out of that comes the last image of punching this highway through the mountains . . . invading a region that had never been invaded before. It was wilderness, with a special quality that I had known as a boy growing up. Suddenly, that wilderness was changing. I knew that, once the highway went through, everything was over. At that point, I built the Indian graveyard [into the poem], because the Indians stand for what the wilderness was, before the white man came along. That's how the process of the poem occurred. Sometimes, poems happen many, many years after the event. You mine your life for stories, and images and ideas.

I look back at a poem like "Elephants" with a kind of fondness, because it happened so long ago. The event that it describes happened thirty years ago now, and the poem itself, twenty years ago. It's like a distant wonderful stranger wrote it. I wouldn't really think to

tamper with it, particularly. If I were to write that poem now, I would probably write it very differently. My styles have changed; the way I approach language changes. I would never pretend to tamper with it. I just look at it; it's like an old, old friend.

. . . "Elephants" appeals to people because it tells a story. It creates a dramatic structure in which there are two characters, a man and a small child . . . their relationship and, in a sense, their relationship to a whole kind of country, to a way of living. So, I think the poem appeals very, very strongly when it's presented publicly. Hopefully, it appeals, as well, to that private moment, when you're just reading a book, and thinking of a particular poem. Because it's a dramatic poem, and it has a dramatic structure, it works in a dramatic situation of a reading. . . . any poem, if it's read out loud properly, will have an effect, even if it's a quiet, intimate, lyric poem, a love poem . . . "Elephants" is just a big, classic, structured, Western poem. You've got an Indian in it; you've got mountains. We live with those kinds of images, because that's part of the heritage of hundreds and hundreds of years of living in this country.

I'm not aware, as a poet, that I'm writing for an audience. I don't even know if I'm writing for myself. I'm writing to make a beautiful thing. I'm writing to make a beautiful poem. After it's written, I send it out to an audience. I might read it at a reading, or I might publish it in a magazine or in a book, but none of those are the purposes for which I write. There's an obsessive nature to what a poet does. I suppose it's just to make something beautiful with language.

ELEPHANTS

The cracked cedar bunkhouse
hangs behind me like a grey pueblo
in the sundown where I sit
to carve an elephant
from a hunk of brown soap
for the Indian boy who lives
in the village a mile back
in the bush.

The alcoholic truck-driver
and the cat-skinner sit beside me
with their eyes closed
all of us waiting out the last hour
until we go back on the grade

and I try to forget the forever
clank clank clank
across the grade
pounding stones and earth to powder
for hours in mosquito darkness
of the endless cold mountain night.

The elephant takes form—
my knife caresses smooth soap
scales off curls of brown
which the boy saves to take home
to his mother in the village

Finished, I hand the carving to him
and he looks at the image of the great
beast for a long time
then sets it on dry cedar
and looks up at me:
What's an elephant?
he asks
so I tell him of the elephants
and their jungles. The story
of the elephant graveyard
which no one has ever found
and how the silent
animals of the rain forest
go away to die somewhere
in the limberlost of distances
and he smiles

tells me of his father's
graveyard where his people have been
buried for years. So far back
no one remembers when it started
and I ask him where the graveyard is
and he tells me it is gone
now where no one will ever find it
buried under the grade of the new
highway.

THE BIRD

The bird you captured is dead.
I told you it would die
but you would not learn
from my telling. You wanted
to cage a bird in your hands
and learn to fly.

Listen again.
You must not handle birds.
They cannot fly through your fingers.
You are not a nest
and a feather is
not made of blood and bone.

Only words
can fly for you like birds
on the wall of the sun.
A bird is a poem
that talks of the end of cages.

FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DISCUSSION

1. What do you think the Indian graveyard symbolizes in "Elephants"?

2. In this poem, what is the relationship of the man to the boy? Of the two people to the wilderness?

3. What do you think caused the bird's death in "The Bird"?

4. Violence and death often occur in Patrick Lane's poetry. What violence is implied in "Elephants" and "The Bird"? Does this make the poems negative or depressing? If not, why not?

5. In the interview, the poet remarks, ". . . what the concept of the poems I try to write is, I'm not really sure. I'm a little bewildered by that." What does this imply about the process of writing poetry? Is it, in part, an unconscious process for a poet such as Lane?

6. Lane remarks "There is an endless concern in this country to regionalize the writer, in a sense, to bring him down to terms that they can cope with." Why do people seek to categorize a writer?

   Does categorizing Patrick Lane as, for example, a "mountain poet" help or hinder an understanding of his poetry?

RELEVANT WORKS

Lane, Patrick. *Poems New & Selected.* Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1978. 112 p. Winner of a Governor General's Literary Award for Poetry (1978).

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Patrick Lane records:

"I was born in Nelson, B.C., on March 26, 1939. I completed my primary education in Vernon, B.C., and then went on to work in the logging camps and sawmills of the interior mountains. In 1968, I took up writing full-time after living in Vancouver and editing for my publishing house, Very Stone House. For years, I wandered around the world, living for a time in South America and in the United States. I have published sixteen collections of poetry, and in 1978, my book *Poems New & Selected* won a Governor General's Award for Poetry. I have lectured and performed my work all over North America, Europe and Asia, and am presently writer-in-residence at Concordia University in Montreal."

Patrick Lane's poetry collections include *Letters from a Savage Mind* (1966), *Separations* (1969), *Mountain Oysters* (1972), *The Sun Has Begun to Eat the Mountains* (1972), *Passing into Stone* (1973), *Beware the Months of Fire* (1973), *Unborn Things* (1975), *Albino Pheasants* (1977), *The Measure* (1980), and *Old Mother* (1982). He has edited the work of his brother, *The Collected Poems of Red Lane* (1968), and, with Lorna Uher, published a collection called *No Longer Two People* (1969).

A conversation with

IRVING LAYTON

My father was a visionary, a dreamer, a scholar who was more concerned with entertaining God's angels than with wondering what his brood was up to. As a matter of fact, the raising of my family, of my siblings, were left largely to my mother. So the books that were in the house were religious books. There was no secular literature at all, and none of my siblings were very interested in poetry when I was growing up. And even after I'd grown up, they did not exhibit too great an interest in literature. Whatever literature my mother was interested in would be the fables and stories, the folk tales of our people. And these stories my mother would tell. And maybe I got my love of narrative from my mother, who was a very, very good storyteller.

. . . I'm writing a memoir called *Waiting for the Messiah* [now published] and I'm interested in showing what signs, what stigmata a young poet, even in his childhood, exhibits. I'm trying to show that things like sexuality, family, death, religion, the street are the earliest images that enter a burgeoning poet's mind. These are the images that will obsess him in one way or another for the rest of his life. For the rest of his life he'll try to unravel the meanings given to him by these earliest images or impressions. That's his education.

. . . In order to support the family, in order to feed her numerous brood, my mother had converted the front parlour into a small grocery shop. I would say my education began with the smells, the aromas from the herring barrels, from the sacks of wheat, from the tins of one assorted condiment or another, and above all, I can never forget the ripe, black, corrupt olives—the smell, the shape, the glistening of those black olives. Now that's the education of the poet!

. . . All of art is a defiance of death. Man hates the notion that he is nothing but a puff of smoke; he is nothing but a whisper in a whirlwind. He hates the notion that he, with his marvellous ego, his brain, his consciousness, and his conscience nevertheless is marked out even as a lowly worm for death.

. . . Life and death are not concepts to the poet. They are to a philosopher; they are to the scientist. And that's what makes the poet different from the philosopher, the metaphysician, the scientist, even the theologian. The poet feels these things very, very personally, very emotionally. Beauty and death are the things that have obsessed me all my life. . . . And these are opposites. They are contradictions, they are contraries. And they exist side by side. And these are the things that obsess the poet, trying to reconcile, trying to understand what they mean.

. . . when I meet a young poet, I look at him and I ask myself, does he really know the pain and the ecstasy of trying to reconcile these two opposites, beauty and death? And when I look at a young poet's lines, or any poet's lines, I really want to know how much of the anguish of living surrounded by contraries, of terrible contradictions, how much of that has he gotten into his lines. That's poetry.

. . . I know life and death, and beauty and anguish, and grief and ecstasy. These are the notes, the great organ notes that your Shakespeare touches, your John Donne, and your [Alfred] Tennyson and your [Robert] Browning, and all your major poets touch. Not cleverness. Not scholarship. Not erudition. It's that pulse beat, that heart throbbing for the pain and the wretchedness, the glory of human existence.

I think I began thinking seriously about the Holocaust and its meaning only in 1967 when the Arabs, when Egypt in particular, were threatening the existence of Israel. To think that a people that had endured so much, that had suffered so much was once again going to be delivered to sure death, and so it seemed at that time because [Gamal Abdel] Nasser was threatening to drive all the Israelis into the sea and to exterminate every living man,

woman, and child on the soil of Israel. So the Jew was horrified, and the poet who loves life. . . . And to feel that all that meant nothing to the world, meant nothing to the Arabs and meant nothing to the world-at-large, that they were prepared to look on with grand, profound indifference at the fate of this embattled and beleaguered people—these were the things that made me think seriously again of the Holocaust.

I wanted to explore the meanings, those psychological and moral meanings of the Holocaust, in the ashes of the dead and the dismembered and the cremated in Dachau and Bergenbelsen and Majdanek. What were these white ashes telling us about Western civilization? Because it was the West, it was nations like France and Germany and Italy and Spain, that were responsible for the dreadful, dreadful agony of six million innocent men, women, and children. What kind of world had we created? What had come out of the hopes of technology and industry and science? What kind of world had come out of the humanism preached from the Renaissance on about glorious man, liberated, benevolent, kind, generous? *This? This* had come out of all the hopes and dreams and aspirations of Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, a Schiller, a Shelley, a Byron . . . Incredible! Incredible! And all the theological dispositions on the nature of sin and guilt. *This? This?* These ashes? These emaciated corpses, lying on the ground in Bergenbelsen, in Majdanek? I had to try to understand that. I had to come to terms with that. And my first poems were poems of great anguish and grief and bewilderment. And so I wrote a poem like "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik." And poems like that. Trying to express my horror and indignation. And my feeling is that we still, still have failed to understand the clear meanings of the Holocaust, its religious, cultural, and ethical meanings. And that is, I think, the failure of the post-Holocaust world.

My father's piety and rectitude certainly influenced me a great deal. My father was a devoutly pious man. And when he retired to the bedroom, which he had made into a sanctuary where he entertained God's messengers, he was for me an image of someone who transcended this world—its cares, its griefs, its greeds, its avarice, its competitiveness—all that. He gave me the image of a pure world. But along with my father's rectitude and piety, was Tom Mix. And Tom Mix influenced me just as much as my father did, for when I went to see a Tom Mix film, there was Tom Mix—and sometimes the Lone Ranger who fought for justice, who fought to defend the orphans and the widows against unjust gangs and villains. . . . So there was my father with his black beard and black impressive eyes, and there was Tom Mix. And that made indeed a very strange, incongruous pair. But if I had to speak the truth, my father and Tom Mix were the great moral influences on my life. And so when I came to write this poem ["The Lone Ranger"], I can see that here my father is as much the Lone Ranger as Tom Mix. And he gets into the poem somewhere with a sense that the world is unjust, that people are unjust, that they are moved by avarice and pride and vanity, and that one must escape the net of pride and avarice and vanity. . . .

. . . Years ago I met the great German, Eric Kastner, in Berlin, and as we sat down to have a beer, the first thing he said to me was—and I'll never forget his words—"Layton, remember, woman is life." I've never forgotten those words. I think those are the truest words ever spoken by any poet. And a poet knows that. And so when I look at a young poet, or I read a young poet, I want to see whether he's aware of beauty and death and the power of women, of sexuality. These are the three things. That's the holy trinity, for me, in any poet, in any poet's soul.

"The Carved Nakedness" is named after the dross of human emotions of vengefulness, malice, hate, greed. . . . It has a great deal of meaning for me. It's about love and the destruction of love. Because that's what the Crucifixion's all about—the most profound symbol in our civilization is that of the Christ's lying or standing crucified on the Cross. He's a symbol of love, and what we have been doing as human beings is to crucify love. That's the most potent symbol, I think, in our civilization.

My notion of the poet is that he's a prophet and a descendant of prophets. If he's not fulfilling his prophetic role, he is nothing but a pleasure merchant, to use a term that I think Bernard Shaw coined for the artist who is really nothing more than an amuser, an entertainer. I believe the poet has a serious vocation. He must fulfill that. If he doesn't, he is only a pleasure merchant, a whore, an entertainer. And they have their place—they have their place. I have no argument against that. They can entertain. But the Miltons and the Dantes and the Shakespeares did more than merely entertain: they told us something profoundly true about the human soul—its capacity for love and vindictiveness and hate and self-redemption. These are the poets that thrill us and will continue to thrill us.

. . . I was very fortunate, I think, in finding myself in a country like Canada, where . . . you have the defiance of life against the death that wishes to eliminate it. The nothingness, the silence that wants to be the epitaph for this grave, frail, valiant defiance of life against the inevitable doom that awaits all living creatures. To be caught right square in the middle by living in Montreal and to be aware of this vibrant, vital civilization that in defiance of this nothingness says we are going to build, we are going to build theatres and we're going to build railroads and we're going to conquer territory. And to hear the mocking whisper—oh, more than whisper—the mocking laugh of that silence, and of the snowflakes whirling over that white, bleak desolation. No poet of my temperament could have wanted for anything more. I have been a very, very lucky man.

Living in Montreal was a lucky thing for me. I don't think I could have developed into the poet that I did become if I'd lived, say, in New York or Chicago, or for that matter, London, England. It had to be here in Montreal, because I was surrounded by French-Canadian Catholics and by English-Canadian Protestants, and they were both alien. I won't say hostile, but they certainly were alien. I had to understand why churchbells rang on Sunday and were so pleasing. I had to understand why the Cross, which is a symbol of love, was something that made me anxious. Why did church bells make me, a Jew, anxious? Why did I feel that they were hostile to me? And why when I saw the Cross, the great symbol of love and self-sacrifice, why did it scare me, as later on the swastika scared some of my co-religionists in Germany and elsewhere? I had to try to understand that, and I had to try to understand the English Canadian, his snobbishness, his standing aloof, his inaccessibility, and his difficulty with his emotions. So I was provided with subject matter, you see. And conflict—chaos, conflict, these are the things that stimulate the poet's imagination because you try to understand with your imagination what you can't with your reason, you see? And that's what poetry's all about. To try to understand what reason cannot enable you to understand. You try to understand by means of intuition and imagination.

THE LONE RANGER

Stranger, keep your six-shooter handy;
the only justice you'll ever see
comes smoking out of its barrels.

In Gulch Valley,
the sheriff's always stoned;
anyway, in the furlined pocket
of Joe Mucho, the saloon-keeper.

Though justice haunts the fevered brains
of prophets and poets, teases
like a half-remembered dream,
in the real world of rustlers
and flap-ear'd knaves
it swings to the ring of their silver dollars.

The citizens? Bah.
They're too scared to do anything
about their notions of right and wrong.
They'll moan and groan and wish
the killings don't take too long
so they can go back to feeling
decent honourable folk again.

Only the Lone Ranger's footfall
makes the corrupt judge shudder,
gives him bad dreams.

Poems are his silver bullets;
sizzling quatrains, a burst of couplets.

When he shoots them into the air
to scatter the massing shadows,
they drop from the clouds
on varmint and huckster,
chilling them into a still life forever.

Niagara-on-the-Lake
August 1, 1982

THE CARVED NAKEDNESS

After a volcano erupts
ornaments and charms are shaped
from the boiling lava
propelled down mountainside and slope.

You can buy them,
in Sicily or Yucatan, for a song
to wear as a talisman
on bared arm or wrist.

So have I made poems
from the black, scalding dross
that poured out
from my raging breast.

Take whatever you wish or can
but don't overlook those
with a harsh, singular beauty
in their carved nakedness.

VENERANDA DANCING

She dances like a solitary bacchante

The tight miniskirt she flicks
before my eyes
is a leopard's ever-changing
spots

On the crowded dancefloor
she dances like someone possessed
and I am lost to all
except the motion
of her disordering limbs

When she dances like that
I can follow her down
all the way down
into the smoky bowels of hell

EINE KLEINE NACHTMUSIK

I was nowhere near
the syphilitic whore called Europe,
smelling of charnel houses and museums

And was not there
when you ripped open the bellies
of pregnant women

Nor when you laughed uproariously
at the spectres
clawing one another for offal

I was not there when you made skeletons
dance for you
and grief-crazed Jewesses to sing

If you're dead
you're beyond my curses and contempt,
inviolable as a jackal's calcified turd

But alive and still insurable,
you're probably in Obersalzburg
letting Mozart ravish your souls

Or in Budapest, Vilna, Cologne
buying sausages, perhaps
Xmas toys for your grandchildren

Why not? Since power's the world's standard
it's your victims, not you,
who feel besmirched and guilty

Ah, *meine Herren,* we live in a time
when atrocity's the norm
and survival the sole merit

In 1980 everyone lives
with some gas in his lungs.
No one will die of it

FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DISCUSSION

1. The Lone Ranger, in the poem of the same name, is compared to a poet. Why?

2. What relationship does "The Carved Nakedness" suggest between strong, negative emotions and writing poetry?

3. Irving Layton says that the poet is "a prophet and a descendant of prophets." If the poet is a prophet, how should society regard him?

4. Discuss the relationship of beauty and death, of contraries, in Layton's poetry.

5. This poet says that Christ is a symbol of love, and that we as human beings have been crucifying love. How have we been doing this?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Listen to a recording of Mozart's "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik" and then read Layton's poem of the same title. How is the poem's title ironic?

2. Read the preface to Layton's book, *The Laughing Rooster*, in which he describes the creative process; then write an essay about the roles of reason and inspiration in writing poetry.

3. In his interview, Layton remarks that we have failed to understand the clear meanings of the Holocaust. In *The Covenant* and *For My Brother Jesus*, Layton discusses the Holocaust in more detail. Read selections from these books and write an essay exploring Layton's view of the relationship between Christianity and the Holocaust.

RELEVANT WORKS

Layton, Irving. *A Red Carpet for the Sun.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1960. 1 vol. (unpaged). Second printing. Winner of a Governor General's Literary Award for Poetry (1959).

_____. *The Laughing Rooster.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964. 112 p. Poems. With a preface by the author.

_____. *Collected Poems.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965. 353 p. illus. With an introduction by the author.

_____. *Selected Poems: Irving Layton.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969. 139 p. Edited, with a preface by Wynne Francis.

_____. *The Collected Poems of Irving Layton.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971. 589 p. With an introduction by the author.

_____. *The Darkening Fire: Selected Poems 1945-1968.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975. 176 p. With an introduction by Wynne Francis.

_____. *The Unwavering Eye: Selected Poems 1969-1975.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975. With an introduction by Eli Mandel.

_____. *For My Brother Jesus.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976. 128 p. Poems. With an introduction by the author. Paperback.

_____. *The Covenant*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977. 112 p. Poems. With an introduction by the author.

_____. *The Poems of Irving Layton*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977. 63 p. (A New Canadian Library original, No. 12) Edited and introduced by Eli Mandel. Paperback.

_____. *The Selected Poems of Irving Layton*. New York: New Directions, 1977. 63 p. Edited by Eli Mandel with an introduction by Hugh Kenner.

_____. *A Wild Peculiar Joy: Selected Poems 1945-1982.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982. 223 p. Poems. Paperback.

_____. *The Gucci Bag*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1983. 143 p. Poems. With an introduction by the author. Paperback.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Irving Layton was born in Romania in 1916 and was brought by his parents to Montreal a year later. He attended Macdonald College, where he received a B.Sc. in agriculture, later completing an M.A. in economics and political science at McGill University in 1946. He has taught at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University) and was writer-in-residence there in 1965. In 1969, he became a professor of English at York University, Toronto, and taught there until 1978.

His first poetry collection, *Here and Now*, appeared in 1945. Since then, he has published many books of poetry, notably *A Red Carpet For The Sun*, which appeared in 1959 and won the Governor General's Award that year for poetry. *The Darkening Fire* (1975) and *The Unwavering Eye* (1975), together with *A Wild Peculiar Joy* (1982), contain selections from almost four decades of writing. Irving Layton has also produced such prose works as *Engagements* (1972) and *Taking Sides* (1977).

A conversation with

GWENDOLYN MacEWEN

I began writing very early. I was scribbling away when I was ten, eleven, twelve years old and I was quite seriously writing poetry when I was fourteen and fifteen in high school. My first poem was published in *The Canadian Forum* when I was seventeen. Then I left school when I was eighteen and began writing seriously.

I didn't go to university because I felt it would take up too much of that precious time in my twenties when I could be using all the energy I had for learning how to write. It's not that I was against university, just very anxious to get ahead. And I realized the only way to become a writer was to write and write for years and years.

I think the question of why a person writes poetry is almost unanswerable. For me, originally, it was a magical activity: it was my way of bringing order to my experience and to a world which was essentially chaotic and disorganized. I felt that, in writing, I had gained a sort of control, a sort of power over my environment. And this was an almost magical power. . . .

. . . When I sit down to write a poem, it's not a matter of being blindly inspired and just dashing it off. It's a very conscious and time-consuming thing. But I do begin with lines which have come to me in a flash—just before sleeping, for instance, or walking along the street. But those lines in themselves are not sufficient to create the poem. The poem comes afterwards, with a lot of thought and hard work. I've never suffered from writer's block. Certainly I have days when I don't feel terrifically inspired or creative, but I write anyway. I couldn't possibly have finished all the books that I've written, whether in prose or in poetry, if I'd simply waited for inspiration to strike me. If I'm in the middle of a work, I will write every day according to my schedule, regardless of how I feel. . . . And certainly there's no such thing as a lack of ideas. If anything, I'm overwhelmed by ideas. My problem is getting rid of excess ideas rather than finding ideas.

The main theme or attitude that emerges through my poetry is one of celebration and an affirmation of life. Art should give us a means whereby we can transcend the ordinary, the suffering that our lives entail, and offer us something beyond, something spiritual and something wonderful. So no matter how dark my poetry might become at times, it's always an affirmation, always a celebration.

Ideally, I think poetry should be presented by the poets themselves wherever possible in the schools. I've done a lot of readings in schools. But that, of course, can't happen all the time. Students should be allowed to experience poems on their own, as a very private, personal experience. Poetry is intensely personal, intensely private. I'm not altogether sure that the classroom is the best atmosphere for the deep appreciation of poetry. People should be allowed to feel a poem, rather than have to worry about it, think about it, analyse it. It's an experience.

The advice I always give to aspiring writers is to be bold, to dare as much as they can possibly dare, to pay attention to the rules, to read a lot, to know a lot about writing, about styles, about form. But then to have the courage to break away and listen to one's own inner voice and trust that inner voice, regardless of anything else.

I've been fascinated with the Middle East since I was a teenager. I've made three separate trips there. My first to Israel, in 1962, and then later on to Egypt, in 1966, when I was researching a novel of ancient Egypt called *King of Egypt, King of Dreams.* It's a novel of the heretic pharaoh Akhenaton. And later, I was in Greece on two occasions and have written a book called *Mermaids and Ikons*, which is a travel book of my experiences in Greece. But my fascination with the Middle East has always been with me. And out of this came the T.E. Lawrence poems, which I had had in mind for at least twenty years.

I'd been thinking about writing the T.E. Lawrence poems ever since I'd been in Israel and stayed in a hotel in Tiberias. The old gentleman who was the proprietor of the hotel invited me down one evening for tea and showed me these marvellous old sepia-tone photographs on the wall. And they were photographs of riders on camels. I was fascinated and went up to one, and he said, "Well, it's Lawrence, you know, Lawrence of Arabia. Did you know that I rode with him?" And he proceeded to tell me stories of the days when he was a sherif in the wild east. And from that time the idea of Lawrence and the Lawrence poems has been with me. . . .

I had thought of doing a novel of Lawrence, but then I realized the only way was through poetry. He himself admired poets, was in awe of poets, and he himself attempted some poetry. . . . He had these marvellous long lines when he did write. So I found myself in these poems writing in long lines and trying to achieve the voice and poetry that he might have written given other circumstances. The book is in the first person, Lawrence, and I adopt the persona of Lawrence. And very often you'll find Lawrence's own lines from *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom,* or from various letters, interwoven throughout the poems.

. . . the Lawrence poems [e.g., "Water," "The Desert," "Solar Wind," "Boanerges"] are about a man in a very agonizing search for his own soul, for his own spiritual validity, a man who was tormented by doubts, tormented by the fact that he was not a hero, however much the world insisted upon treating him as a hero. A man of multiple paradoxes. And I love paradoxes, so that was why I was drawn to this subject and this man.

"Inside The Great Pyramid" is about quite another place—Egypt. And this poem was written after I had ventured inside the great pyramid at Giza. (Suffering from claustrophobia did not help this adventure at all.)

"Dark Pines Under Water" is a poem about what I think is the mysterious aspect of Canada, the mysterious and unexplored country.

Right now, I'm working on another book of short stories, which is a sequel to my earlier book of short stories *Noman*. This book is called *Noman's Land,* being in fact Canada, which I spell with a "K," and which seems odd when people first read the *Noman* book. But that's because I've discovered Canada is just as mysterious and exotic in every way as these eastern countries that I've been writing about and visiting. So I'm very absorbed now in looking for a particularly Canadian myth, a Canadian reality. And this has preoccupied me over the years just as much as Egypt and Greece and all these other countries.

I am certainly a Canadian writer in the sense that I'm a writer living in Canada and I am a Canadian. And I've certainly been affected by this country as a whole, even though it appears that I've written and travelled in so-called exotic countries. I think that, in itself, might be a very Canadian thing to do—only then to return to the vastness and the great silence of this country as another kind of exotic environment, as another mystery.

WATER

When you think of it, water is everything. Or rather,
Water ventures into everything and becomes everything.
It has
All tastes and moods imaginable; water is history
And the end of the world is water also.
I have tasted water
From London to Miransah. In France it tasted
Of Crusaders' breastplates, swords, and tunnels of rings
On ladies' fingers.
In the springs of Lebanon water had
No color, and was therefore all colors,
outside of Damascus
It disguised itself as snow and let itself be chopped
And spooned onto the stunned red grapes of summer.

For years I have defended water, even though I am told
there are other drinks.
Water will never lie to you, even when it insinuates itself
Into someone else's territory. Water has style.

Water has no conscience and no shame; water
thrives on water, is self-quenching.
It often tastes of brine and ammonia, and always
Knows its way back home.

When you want to travel very far, do as the Bedouin do—
Drink to overflowing when you can,
and then
Go sparingly between wells.

THE DESERT

Only God lives there in the seductive Nothing
That implodes into pure light. English makes Him
an ugly monosyllable, but Allah breathes
A fiery music from His tongue, ignites the sands,
invents a terrible love that is
The very name of pain.

The desert preserves Him
as the prophets found Him, massive and alone.
They went there, into that awful Zero
to interpret Him,
for Himself to know, for He said: Help me,
I am the One who is alone, not you. Tell Me who I am.

Camels lean into the desert, lost in some thought
so profound it can only be guessed. When
Will God invent man? When
will the great dream end?
My skin crawls with a horrible beauty in this
Nothingness, this Everything—

I fall to my knees in the deep white sand, and my head
implodes into pure light.

SOLAR WIND

It comes upon you unawares—
something racing out of the edge
Of your vision, as when you are staring at something
and not staring—looking through—
A herd of white horses grazing on the periphery
Of your sight, and the afternoon
slanting into night—

Comes the wind that is
the color of the sun, and your eyes
which are nuggets of gold follow it
down the barrels of the rifles, through
the gun-cotton, and over the culverts,
Leaving everything gold, gold in its wake.

The past and the future are burning up; the present
melts down the middle, a river of wind,
wind from the sun, gold wind, anything—
And suddenly you know that all mysteries have been solved
for you, all questions answered.

You must find a god to worship or you will die
In that unholy moment just before darkness and the sound
Of guns.

BOANERGES

I call all my grand bikes *sons of thunder,* or
devil-horses, as Auda would have said;
Someone warned me I'd break my neck on my present one.
I said that's better than dying in bed,
Or walking down some street with its hungry doors
and falling off the kerb
into someone else's death.

At the very least I want my death to be my own;
meanwhile I eat the miles, shape myself
To the flashing contours of the hills, know myself
to be streets ahead of everyone.
I ride this wild motor-god until my guts explode
like seeds of dynamite, then
fizzle out into perfect nothing.

Now every night I pray the lord my soul to keep,
And make sure everything's alive before I go to sleep.

from **INSIDE THE GREAT PYRAMID**

I thought:
we have made this, we
have made *this.*
I scrambled out into
the scandalous sun and saw
the desert was an hourglass
we had forgotten to invert,
a tasselled camel falling
to his knees, the River
filling the great waterclock
of earth.

CAIRO, 1966

from **DARK PINES UNDER WATER**

This land like a mirror turns you inward
And you become a forest in a furtive lake;
The dark pines of your mind reach downward,
You dream in the green of your time,
Your memory is a row of sinking pines.

FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DISCUSSION

1. Read the excerpt from "Inside the Great Pyramid" and discuss the poem's imagery. Is MacEwen's poetry visual?

2. "The Desert" contains many paradoxes. "Allah . . . invents a terrible love that is/The very name of pain." Lawrence's skin "crawls with a horrible beauty in this/ Nothingness, this Everything." Why would Nothingness be described as Everything, beauty as horrible, and love as pain? Are these paradoxes resolved?

3. In "Solar Wind," what might that wind be? Why would Lawrence suddenly know that all mysteries have been solved? Or have they?

4. Read the excerpt from "Dark Pines Under Water" and discuss the use of metaphor.

5. Gwendolyn MacEwen explains that "Dark Pines Under Water" is about the mysterious aspect of Canada, the mysterious and unexplored country. Is Canada a mysterious country, as mysterious and exotic as the eastern countries she writes about? Why or why not?

6. The author feels that writing poetry is "a magical activity." How would you explain this statement?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. The writer remarks ". . . no matter how dark my poetry might become at times, it's always an affirmation, always a celebration." How would "Boanerges" be an affirmation of life? "Solar Wind?" "The Desert?" "Water?" Write an essay on the theme of affirmation and celebration.

2. Gwendolyn MacEwen produces fiction as well as poetry. Read "The Second Coming of Julian the Magician." What problems would a real magician face in a non-magical environment? Why is this question relevant to our modern, highly scientific society?

3. MacEwen says, "art should give us a means whereby we can transcend the ordinary, the suffering that our lives entail, and offer us something beyond, something spiritual and something wonderful." Do you think she achieves this in her poetry?

PUBLISHED WORKS

MacEwen, Gwendolyn. *Julian the Magician*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1963. 151 p. A novel.

_____. *King of Egypt, King of Dreams*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1971. 287 p. A novel.

_____. *Noman*. Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1972. 121 p. Short stories. Includes "The Second Coming of Julian the Magician."

_____. *Magic Animals: Selected Poems Old and New*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1974. 154 p. Poems.

_____. *Mermaids and Ikons: a Greek Summer*. Toronto: Anansi, 1978. 110 p. Travel recollections of Greece.

_____. *The T.E. Lawrence Poems*. Oakville, Ont.: Mosaic Press/Valley Editions, 1982. Poems.

_____. *Earthlight: Selected poetry of Gwendolyn MacEwen, 1963-1982*. Don Mills, Ont.: General Publishing, 1982. 110 p. (Spectrum poetry series.)

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Gwendolyn MacEwen was born in Toronto in 1941 and educated there and in Winnipeg. She was married at one time to the Greek singer, Nikos Tsingos, and with him translated a portion of the work of the Greek poet Yannis Ritsos. These two long poems, together with her version of Euripides' play, appear in *The Trojan Women* (1981). She has published two books for children, *The Chocolate Moose* (1980) and *The Honey Drum* (1983), as well as numerous collections of poetry. The booklets *Selah* and *The Drunken Clock* were privately published in 1961, and were followed by the larger publications *The Rising Fire* (1963), *A Breakfast for Barbarians* (1966), *The Shadow-Maker* (1969), *The Armies of the Moon* (1972), and *The Fire-eaters* (1976). *The Shadow-Maker* was the winner of the Governor General's Literary Award for Poetry in 1969.

A conversation with

ALISTAIR MacLEOD

I went to school in Dunvegan, Nova Scotia. I went to a one-room school, and a two-room school through Grade Eleven. Through Grade Twelve, I went to Inverness. After that, my education wavered here and there. One of the things I find interesting about looking back is that I was late going almost every place. I was even late starting primary school. For some reason, I didn't go until I was seven or something, while everybody else went when they were six. By the time I finally went to university, most of the people that had left high school were graduating. I graduated from Grade Twelve in Inverness and then I worked for a year in Alberta. I went to the Nova Scotia Teacher's College in Truro and then taught for a year on Portwood Island. I worked in a mine for a year. I went to St. Francis Xavier University and I was there for three years and then went to the University of New Brunswick, where I got a Master's degree. I came back and taught two years at the Nova Scotia Teacher's College and then went to the University of Notre Dame in Indiana and received a Ph.D. from Notre Dame in 1968.

That's a longer academic journey than most people have. . . . A great deal of it had to do with my economic circumstances. I did not have any money. And a lot of this was just work for a year and get enough money. You know, hope that the money you earned, combined with whatever scholarships, things of that nature, came your way. And I was very fortunate in that way, that this would add up to enough money. . . .

I always liked to read and I was always the kind of person who liked writing the essays in Grade Eleven and liked writing the essays in Grade Twelve. I didn't like doing physics very much. I was the person who won the prize in English in Grade Eleven and Grade Twelve. And it was always something that I wanted to do, probably more than I wanted to do other things. And when I was in university, I was always involved in things like the literary magazine, student newspaper, and so on.

When I was at the University of New Brunswick, I won the Charles G.D. Roberts Memorial Prize for the best short story. And as a result of that I got a very nice letter from Alden Nowlan, whom I did not know at that time. U.N.B. at the time was a very exciting place as far as literature and literary activity were concerned. You know, Fred Cogswell was there, Alfred Bailey, and a lot of people who were interested in that type of thing. And I think when you look back at that now, twenty-four years ago or whatever that was, it seems obviously more amazing now than it did at the time because, when you're in those circumstances, you don't have very good perspective. I think that was the first time that I felt I tried myself against a larger audience and the first time that I felt it was really, perhaps, a worthwhile thing to be doing. . . . That was kind of important to me because, you know, it was getting your feet wet in a larger pond, or a larger lake or in the ocean, or whatever metaphor you choose to use.

I think each literary form has its own perfection—if that doesn't sound too pompous. You can write a very good lyric poem and you can write a very good novel. You can write a very good short story and you can say that they're all the same although they are different, in the same way that a musician may play the mandolin and the guitar and the banjo and they are all somewhat the same. If you were to say to him "Why this instrument instead of that?," I suppose the answer might be that for certain purposes, for certain kinds of music, one is more suitable. One of the things about the short story is that you do not have very much time or perhaps very much space to manoeuvre within. I write in an intense manner, or so I like to think. And I think you can do this if you only have to do it for maybe twenty-five or thirty pages. It's the difference between running the 100-yard dash and a marathon. In the former, you can really go all out and be really intense, and in the latter you have to consider pacing and going the

distance. And I like the discipline of the form of the short story, knowing that if you waste ten pages you're really in trouble because that's half your space. I like the intensity and the demands that the intensity makes.

My writing methods generally involve thinking quite a bit about the material. I'm one of those writers who begins with an idea and then I try to structure it in such a way that the idea will be as good as it possibly can be. This is something like the architect laying out his plans, or the cook organizing his or her recipe and then going ahead and trying to fulfill it. This does not mean that you have to be stupidly dedicated to the recipe if you suddenly think that you want to throw in another handful of raisins or something like that; go ahead and do it and find out what the results are. But I do believe that you should have some kind of destination, rather than just being the carpenter who goes out there with a hammer and nails and starts hammering around and people come and say "What are you building?" And he says, "I don't know: I'm just going to see how it turns out." I'm not that loose, but I generally get an idea and I try to structure the idea and follow it as carefully as I can.

In terms of how I actually write, I try to get up in the morning and write in longhand. And then when I'm satisfied with that, I type it. Some writers do think on the typewriter. I think with a pen rather than a typewriter. Then I transform it and I make some revisions when I transform it. But, by the second transformation, I'm generally pretty certain and I stay pretty much with what I've got.

I think that my goals in life are to do what I do as well as I possibly can. And in terms of writing, I would like to leave behind something that is worthwhile. Also, I would like to be fairly inventive in doing that, fairly imaginative. There is a saying among writers that the best work is work that is inventive, that is not imitative. I guess that is not surprising; that's the way it is in everything. I like to believe that old idea that no one else has your fingerprints. And so, when you are doing your work well, it should be something that no one else can do but yourself. And I think that that's a worthy goal for a writer. People ask writers lots of questions. I think it's because they think writers are more mysterious than they really are. The most important thing for the aspiring writer is that he or she should be true to his or her own heart. I believe that the best art comes from that which the individual cares most deeply about. And so I think that the young writer should look deeply into his or her heart and find what is there and then try to find a form which will present, to the best advantage possible, what they care most deeply about.

The genesis of "The Boat" centered in the idea of choice: the idea that people have to pay prices for the individual roads that they walk in life. And I think that when you have to make a choice between two "goods," something like honesty and loyalty, two qualities that are perceived as goods, it is more difficult to choose this than if you were choosing between obvious good and evil. And I was also interested in the idea of tradition: what one generation knows and what one generation is willing to pass on to the next generation. And I tried very hard to be fair in this story because I think the mother was interested in certain values, and these are very good and positive values. And I think that the father was interested in values that are good and positive as well. . . . what I was trying to handle in that story was a kind of tension, conflict between two value systems, each of which is good in its own way.

I would like this work ["The Boat"] to impress upon people the importance of the past, the importance of tradition, and the importance of the lives of those who have gone before them. I think that far too often in the present day we think of ourselves as an instant people—people who have no past, people who have no surroundings. . . . also that, today, people are encouraged to be able to do whatever they want to do if they have the ability to carry out their plans. And . . . this is as it should be. I also think that in the past a lot of people lived lives of sacrifice. Perhaps people really did things that they did not want to do. To choose to do something that you really perhaps do not want to do has intrigued me. That may be cowardliness on one hand, or on the other hand it may be

very noble. And I'm thinking perhaps of those people who stayed home with their mothers—of those girls who never married or never went to university—stayed home with their mothers for fifty years or something like that. Did they really want to do this? Did they do this out of love? Did they do this out of a misguided sense of obligation or out of a true sense of obligation? I think what I was trying to deal with in that story is questions of that nature. And I think that I would like that work to impress upon people the seriousness of choice and sacrifice and commitment.

One has to realize that there is perhaps more than one message in an individual work, and I don't think the writer is necessarily writing for one specific audience or saying one specific thing to one specific group of people. The Canadian short story writer, Alice Munro, says somewhere that she thinks of her writing as an offering. That it's something that you put out, and the reader can come and more or less take what he or she wishes from it. I think of myself somewhat along those lines. People come to the work of art and they say, "Well, I really like this thing, but I didn't like that." And someone else will come and they'll say, "Well, I really liked that in it, but I didn't like this. I really like your female characters, but I don't like your male character." . . . the best you can say is, "Well, I'm just putting this out. I'm trying to make this as good as I possibly can, and it's there for you to read and absorb and digest. And, of course, it's there for you to have your opinions."

And so we fished through the heat of August and into the cooler days of September when the water was so clear we could almost see the bottom and the white mists rose like delicate ghosts in the early morning dawn. And one day my mother said to me, "You have given added years to his life."

And we fished on into October when it began to roughen and we could no longer risk night sets but took our gear out each morning and returned at the first sign of the squalls; and on into November when we lost three tubs of trawl and the clear blue water turned to a sullen grey and the trochoidal waves rolled rough and high and washed across our bows and decks as we ran within their troughs. We wore heavy sweaters now and the awkward rubber slickers and the heavy woollen mitts which soaked and froze into masses of ice that hung from our wrists like the limbs of gigantic monsters until we thawed them against the exhaust pipes' heat. And almost every day we would leave for home before noon, driven by the blasts of the northwest wind, coating our eyebrows with ice and freezing our eyelids closed as we leaned into a visibility that was hardly there, charting our course from the compass and the sea, running with the waves and between them but never confronting their towering might.

And I stood at the tiller now, on these homeward lunges, stood in the place and in the manner of my uncle, turning to look at my father and to shout over the roar of the engine and the slop of the sea to where he stood in the stern, drenched and dripping with the snow and the salt and the spray and his bushy eyebrows caked in ice. But on November twenty-first, when it seemed we might be making the final run of the season, I turned and he was not there and I knew even in that instant that he would never be again.

One November twenty-first the waves of the grey Altantic are very very high and the waters are very cold and there are no signposts on the surface of the sea. You cannot tell where you have been five minutes before and in the squalls of snow you cannot see. And it takes longer than you would believe to check a boat that has been running before a gale and turn her ever so carefully in a wide and stupid circle, with timbers creaking and straining, back into the face of the storm. And you know that it is useless and that your voice does not carry the length of the boat and that even if you knew the original spot, the relentless waves would carry such a burden perhaps a mile or so by the time you could return. And you know also, the final irony, that your father like your uncles and all the men that form your past, cannot swim a stroke.

FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DISCUSSION

1. If you experienced a feeling of suspense while reading or hearing the excerpt from "The Boat," suggest how the writer creates this feeling.

2. In "The Boat," the father falling overboard is not described. Does this increase or decrease the horror of the event? Why?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. In his interview, MacLeod says, "The genesis of "The Boat" centered in the idea of choice. . . . I think that when you have to make a choice between two "goods," something like honesty and loyalty . . . it is more difficult." Read all of "The Boat." Which character is in the process of making a choice? What are the two "goods" the individual is choosing between?

2. The writer says, "I would like this work ["The Boat"] to impress upon people the importance of past, the importance of tradition, and the importance of the lives of those who have gone before them." Has MacLeod achieved this objective?

3. This author's writings often deal with the theme of exile. Does "The Boat" deal with this theme? If so, how?

4. MacLeod says that "the best art comes from that which the individual cares most deeply about." Do *you* write better when the subject interests you deeply? Why, do you think?

RELEVANT WORKS

MacLeod, Alistair. *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976. Short stories. Paperback.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Born in 1936 in North Battleford, Saskatchewan, Alistair MacLeod attended high school in Cape Breton and later earned a teaching certificate at the Nova Scotia's Teacher's College in Truro. He graduated from St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, N.S. with a B.A. and a B.Ed., and from the Universities of New Brunswick and Notre Dame with an M.A. and a Ph.D. He taught at the University of Indiana from 1966-1969 and is currently a professor of English and creative writing at the University of Windsor.

MacLeod's short stories began appearing in journals in the 1950s. His collection, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, was published in 1976. Of its seven stories, "The Boat," and the title story, were reproduced in *Best American Short Stories* in 1969 and 1975 respectively.

A conversation with

ANTONINE MAILLET

. . . the main things I remember about my childhood are being happy, being joyful, having fun, finding life so wonderful. Every morning, I would wake up and—there's another day for me. And when it was not good enough, I would dream it better. I remember going to sleep at night . . . wanting to dream of a better life. I was already some kind of a writer, a storyteller.

. . . I cannot imagine being a writer today without having had that kind of childhood. I loved stories so much . . . the definition for me of a writer is to be able to tell a story and to be able to tell it as a grown-up who still remembers the world as he saw it the first time. A child is somebody who sees the world for the first time. So, every impression, every idea he gets, is a first-time idea. A writer is somebody who can still feel that . . . for example, sand is new for him, so he knows how to describe it as a surprise. And so, the reader will get it as having never seen sand before in his life. I remember finding friends as a child. And I knew how important it was to have friends around, to have a family. Now, when I write about La Sagouine or Pélagie or any of the characters like Don L'Orignal, they want to find a land. They want to belong to something. Well, I remember needing that belonging to something when I was a child.

I wanted to go to university so badly that I had life come true to my dreams. How come the college for girls opened the very year I was ready to go? I am not responsible for that. Destiny is. But I did go to university because the university opened its doors to women when I was ready for it. . . . I belong to a tradition of oral literature. But you cannot write the oral. You have to learn also the language of writing. Now, how can you do that if you don't go to school. I am an Acadian of oral tradition *qui s'est frottée aux écoles*, who got near a school. Therefore, I know the grammar of the French language. But, I also know the real tone, accent, intonation, and metaphors of the oral language that are so beautiful.

. . . Pélagie [the character] came to me as a real woman, as a reality, and also as a dream. When I was a child, I remember one day somebody told me, "You know, you're ten today, and it's the tenth of May. When you're ten on the tenth, you have the right to make a wish, and it will come true." And believe it or not, my wish on that day was that some day I would rewrite [Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's] *Evangeline*. I had not read it at ten, but the story was going on in my family. I thought it wasn't fair that *Evangeline* would have been written by an American and that she . . . lost a lover. . . . I didn't like that story. So I said, "Someday, I want to tell that story and write it with my own family." Now, I think *Pélagie* is that dream coming true.

Pélagie is to me the Acadian vision of an Evangeline. She is not a young girl, a virgin standing like a statue looking at the ocean, but a real, true woman with children, fighting to come back, which Evangeline didn't do. Pélagie is coming back after deportation. She was in Georgia, and she was looking at the north. She was saying, "That land is mine, and if I don't get back there with my family, who will remember us?" She was coming back so that history could go on. And Bélonie, the old man with Pélagie in the cart, is the one that knows that. He's pushing her. He's the one that knows you have to save the memory. So, she came back with her cart, and on her way, she met a lover. Beausoleil-Broussard is the only man that I took from history. Pélagie is fictitious. All the characters are fictitious, except Beausoleil-Broussard, who lived. But he's the only man who looks fictitious because he was such a legend that he was greater than nature. And I took him as a legend, and I put him in the book as a hero. Of course, Pélagie sees that man as the one who is bringing Acadia back on the sea and she is bringing Acadia back on the land. And the sea and the land once in a while meet, and so they met. And then they lose each other again, and they meet again, and she knows he's *the* man. He's the

second part of Acadia. He's the sea man. But one day she gets to Baltimore; she misses him; they don't meet. And she has to know whether she's going to go back to that man, to her love, or go to her other love, which is Acadia. And she has to make a decision.

. . . [the excerpt] shows how Pélagie felt about Acadia, wanting to go back to that paradise lost. But . . . she never got to the real paradise. She got to Acadia, and she found that it was lost for her, for her people. It had gone into other hands. It was a land taken by somebody else—still as beautiful to look at—but not hers anymore. And she had to reconquer. That is, her descendants had to reconquer their own land. That's the real tragedy.

The Acadian people are very important to me as a writer. It's important for me to have very wide-ranging material. In French, we say *la matière.* Now, in Acadia we have a real *la matière d'Acadie*—an Acadian matter—and to me, it's history. It's the memory of all that Acadia has lived. I wouldn't say what Acadia went through—that sounds too *péjoratif*—but what Acadia lived. It's joyful and there are bad moments also. Now, the memory of all that, is culture.

What is culture to me? It's how people live, look at their own life, analyse it, and make something positive come out of it. Culture is the transmission of a wisdom that a whole people have built up through centuries. Now, the Acadian people have built a culture, a wisdom, a mentality, a way of looking at life, a way of laughing, a way of dreaming, a way of hoping. That's a culture. Well, to me it's important to revive it, to give it to the world. I see the world, or a civilization, as a mosaic. In French, especially in Acadia, we have a word *pays*. . . . I write of the *pays,* of the country which is a people more than a nation. . . . It's not a country . . . officially we cannot speak of voting for Acadia. No, it's just a memory, a history, a living people. Acadia can be anywhere as long as there's an Acadian living. That's why I feel that culture is more important in my case than politics. I don't want to deal with politics and say, "Let's try to build a new province independent from this one." No, I want to save my ancestors' gift, which is a wisdom. Acadia is not a nation. One must admit that Acadia is not officially a country. There is no place where you can mail your letter and say Acadia. (You can do it, but it's not official.) But Acadia exists. So, when they tell me Acadia is no more, it is since I'm here. I mean, as long as you have an Acadian, you have Acadia. But it means it's not a place. It's a people; it's a memory; it's a culture and it's living beings. When I go to Montreal, there's a part of Acadia in Montreal because I bring with me my identity, my mentality, my culture, my language, my ancestors, and my history. My way of behaving is not as a Québécer, is not any more French, is not absolutely American. What is it? It's Acadian. Well, as long as you can identify somebody as being something, that 'something' exists. So I believe that Acadia is still alive in its people.

. . . the humor of Acadia is a way of making fun of ourselves and of everyone else who tries to show us how to live. When a Québécer corrects our language, we have a way of telling him to shut up which is humor. There's a humorous way of confronting tragedy. Like La Sagouine. La Sagouine is a tragic woman. When you look at La Sagouine, she has no place to live. She has no money to make a living. She has no means to get justice. She has almost no vote. She has nothing. And yet, she has life. And she has a way of saying that she has nothing that you believe she has everything. She is humor facing tragedy.

I think it is significant that my best characters or best-known characters are women. But it is not because I am a woman. I don't think I am so *chauvin.* No. But I think Acadia is more or less on the feminine side. You know, there is the animus and the anima. I think Acadia is anima. I believe in countries having a mentality, a mood. Acadia is more on the complex side, more visceral than cerebral . . . a man is more cerebral and a woman more visceral. . . . So I think that Acadia is better represented by a woman. Another reason is that the woman gives birth. Acadia is being reborn . . . Pélagie brings a people back to birth. Later on, today, Acadia is being born again. It's coming out of the woods. La Sagouine is a woman that gives us the color of a new Acadia.

Pélagie is the active woman. She's action. She's the leader. She brings a people back to a country. She doesn't discuss things; she drives them home. La Sagouine wouldn't have the drive to bring a people back home. She has been born in poverty. She has guts, but not to drive a people back home. Just to discuss it. She's wisdom. She's the one that looks at everything and says, "Well, this is my point of view. This is my way of seeing things." And she makes other people drive back home.

When *La Sagouine* is being performed, I don't have to bother very much about stage interpretation, or the direction of [actress] Viola Léger. At first, I was preoccupied. How was she going to do it? How was she going to feel on stage? What interpretation was she going to give to this woman? But the moment she was on stage, I knew immediately, that was *it.* She put La Sagouine to birth on stage, as I had done on paper. And playing it, giving it, acting it year after year, she built up a character so profound, so real—so La Sagouine—that I couldn't touch it. And I would never say now, "Change your costume; change your mood; change your interpretation." She has it. And it's La Sagouine.

It's special to be an Acadian writer because an Acadian is both French and American. We're on *la charniere* [hinge]. At *le carrefour* [crossroads]. We're on a spot where an old culture—the French culture of many centuries—meets an American or North American land, climate, and sphere. The Acadians have brought that old French culture to the new North American land and way of living. So I feel that I'm not French anymore, and I feel that I am not American. Yet I'm something of both, and I'm also something of Canada. Canada has a special history and a special mentality. I feel very at ease with all of that. I feel that I am a part of this great Canadian country which is made of many cultures—mainly two great ones. Not that one is better. If you took away one, you would make a hole in our mosaic. Now, Acadia within the French-Canadian culture is a culture in itself. Maybe it is smaller. But small is beautiful, and small is rare, and small is indispensable.

. . . it's important for society to have writers—not only to tell the future generations but to tell society what it's all about. I mean, who is going to tell people what they look like, if not the books, the paintings, the music? So it's important for society to make sure that we artists go on.

from **LA SAGOUINE**

. . . We live in America, but we ain't Americans. Nope, Americans, they work in' em factories in the States, and in summer, they come around, visitin' our beaches in their white trousers 'n speakin English. 'n the're rich, them Americans, 'n we ain't. Us, we live in Canada; so we figure we mus' be Canadians.

. . . Well, that ain't true either, cause the Dysarts, 'n the Carrolls, 'n the Jones, they just ain't like us, and they also live in Canada. If the're Canadians, we sure can't be the same. Cause the're English, 'n us, we're French.

. . . Nope, we ain't completely French, can't say that: the French folks is the folks fr'm France, *les Française de France*. 'n fer that matter, we're even less *Française de France* than we're Americans. We're more like French Canadians, they told us.

Well, that ain't true either. French Canadians are those that live in *Québec*. They *call'em* Canayens or *Québécois*. But how can we be *Québécois* if we ain't livin' in *Québec*? Fer the love of Christ, where do we live?

FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DISCUSSION

1. In the excerpt from *La Sagouine*, the title character attempts to define an Acadian. Does she succeed? If so, in what way?

2. La Sagouine is a seventy-two-year-old charwoman, a former prostitute, and the wife of an Acadian fisherman. Why might the author choose to make such a character her heroine?

3. *La Sagouine* was first produced as a radio play. What qualities of this writing would make it a successful radio production?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. *La Sagouine* is a collection of sixteen monologues that offer the memories, grievances, and insights of an aged woman. Maillet describes her as "humor facing tragedy." After reading the book, would you agree with that description? Why or why not? Write an essay explaining your agreement or disagreement.

2. Read Maillet's *Pélagie: The Return to a Homeland*. In what way(s) is it a tragic story?

3. Why are the characters in *Pélagie* more like those in fairy tales that those found in books about "real" people?

4. Compare the characters of Pélagie and La Sagouine. How are they similar? different?

5. In much of Antonine Maillet's work, people like La Sagouine, who live on the other side of the tracks, are given surnames (e.g., Noume, La Cruche), while others are named for their occupations (e.g., Mayoress, Milliner). Why would the writer name her characters in this way?

6. How does Acadian speech differ from the *joual* of Québec?

RELEVANT WORKS

Maillet, Antonine. *La Sagouine: piece pour une femme seule*. Ottawa: Leméac, 1971. 105 p. (*Collection Repertoire acadien*, [1 - 2]).

_____. *Don l'Orignal*. Montréal: Leméac, 1972. 190 p. Preface de Jean Cleo Godin. Winner of a Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction (1972).

_____. *The Tale of Don l'Orignal*. Translated by Barbara Godard. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1978. 107 p. Translation of *Don l'Orignal*.

_____. *Pélagie-la Charrette*. Montréal: Leméac, 1979. 351 p. Winner of the Prix Goncourt, 1979.

_____. *La Sagouine*. Translated by Luis de Céspedes. Toronto: Simon & Pierre Publishing, 1979. 183 p.

_____. *Pélagie: The Return to a Homeland*. Translated by Philip Stratford. Don Mills, Ont.: General Publishing, 1982. A novel.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Antonine Maillet was born in Bouctouche, New Brunswick, in 1929. She attended College Notre Dame d'Acadie in Moncton and the Universities of Montreal and Laval. She received a doctorate from the latter and presently teaches literature there.

Her first novel, *Pointe-aux-coques*, was published in 1958, and was followed by *On a mangé la dune*, a collection of tales (1962) and the drama *Les Crasseux* in 1968. *La Sagouine*, initially written for radio, was published as a novel in 1971. These reminiscences of a seventy-two-year-old charwoman, former prostitute and wife of an Acadian fisherman, have been performed on stage by Viola Léger in both English and French. There followed *Par derrière chez mon père* (1972), and *Rabelais et les traditions populaires en Acadie* (1972), a collection of archaisms still in use in francophone areas of the Atlantic provinces. *L'Acadie pour quasiment rien* (1973) is Maillet's personal travel guide to Acadia. Two novels, *Gapi et Sullivan*, and *Mariaagélas* appeared in 1973, and a play, *Evangéline Deusse* in 1977. The novel, *Pélagie-la Charrette*, published in 1979, won France's highest literary award, the first time that the Prix Goncourt was awarded to a non-native of France. The novel, *Cent ans dans les bois*, appeared in 1981.

A conversation with

W.O. MITCHELL

. . . I was born in Weyburn, Saskatchewan. There were no girls in our family—except for my mother and Olga the maid or Herta or whichever one. Four boys in our family, and I was the second from the oldest: my brother Jack, seven years older than me, and then the little boys. We're the three little boys, Billy, Bobby, and Dicky. Our father died when I was five, and it had quite an influence on me. My mother felt she should keep the memory of our father alive for us, and very, very strong family ties persisted, even after my mother's death. I was very moved when we went back to Weyburn, and I found out the hymn she had asked for was "Blessed Be The Tie That Binds." By God, that was her theme song.

My father was a great reader. . . . He taught me to read when I was four years old from *The Regina Leader*. . . . And when he died, his books were all around. I was a voracious reader and read all of the [John] Galsworthy novels, and [Thomas] Carlyle and Matthew Arnold. I just wanted to read everything. . . .

. . . About twelve, or maybe earlier, at eleven, I must have picked up a TB germ, what they called bovine tuberculosis, from raw milk. It attacks the bone. In my instance, it attacked the right arm and wrist. . . . The doctor suggested to my mother that I might live if I went down to a warmer clime. So, at the age of twelve, and from twelve to seventeen, I went to the Gulf of Mexico and Florida. I went to St. Petersburg Senior High School and beautifully came under the influence of Emily Murray. She was an English teacher. I conceived a great passion for acting, and I was great at it. . . . I was first an actor, and the craft of acting and that of the writer are probably the two closest arts.

. . . When I finished St. Petersburg Senior High, my mother and younger brothers went back to Weyburn. I came to Manitoba, to Winnipeg. I started out in medicine. My wrist kicked up, and I shifted into philosophy. It was one of the greatest disasters that ever happened to me. It also meant I became a Lodge boy, a follower of Professor Rupert Lodge, and he marked me. He was a Platonist. For years, I considered myself a Platonist with Presbyterian overtones. My learned son finally said to me, "You're no Platonist; you're existentialist," so I guess I am. I've sort of made apologies to Professor Lodge, wherever he is, because he hated pragmatists, and he figured an existentialist was an euphemism for pragmatist. Then I had years of riding freights, selling encyclopedias, egg boilers, from door to door, one six-week season with the Red River Shows where I was a high diver and a water clown. I left them in Cranbrook when I did a back layout in the swan open formation. I came down feet first in the little five-foot pool where somebody had left a crackerjack box floating. That was the end of my carnival career. . . . I returned to university and met Professor [F.M.] Salter. I shall never discharge my debt to him. He talked me into taking Education. That was really the end of my formal education. I married my wife, Myrna, and went to my first school, which was in Castor, Alberta. *Tobacco Road* [by Erskine Caldwell] without the tobacco road, near the end of the depression years.

The summer I was nineteen, I'd shipped out. I was a deck hand on a Greek freighter. And I ended up in France. And I was a good boy. Every night, I would write home to mother. And when I came back to university the following year . . . I think it was John Thompson who created a literary quarterly called the *'Toba*. I imagine it's still in existence. He said, "Did you ever write anything about being in Europe last year?" And I said "Yeah, I sent the stuff home to my mother." And he said, "Do you think it might make something for the *'Toba*?" (I had never written or published anything before in my life.) He said, "Would she have it?" I said, "My mother never threw away anything of mine." And I got it. It turned into a four-part serial. . . . Years and years later, a guy found it in the library. It's still unfortunately in existence. And I was sick with pneumonia

one time, and the kids were sitting on the bed, and I read aloud from it, and God they laughed themselves silly. When I work with young writers and look at the stuff . . . if that had been handed in to me, the first published stuff, I would not only say there's no hope for this person as a writer, but there's no hope for this person as a human being. I definitely know that that was my first experience with being published.

People have funny ideas about the way writers work. They think a person sits down and says something like, "Oh, Norman let me down this weekend, and I'm really suffering. Nobody loves me. I'll write a sad poem." And then writes it. A poem takes this long to write, a short story takes that long. I discovered at some point with Professor Salter that a writer must prospect his or her stored past—not to the end of writing a poem, a short story, a scene in a novel or a play—but just to find, smell, sight, sound, and touch bits of people. Uncritically. It's like going to get a bunch of lumber but you don't know what you're going to build. And so I discovered a thing that worked for me and has worked for some writers I've worked with. One of my students called it "Free Fall." The idea is that the writer sits down very consistently every day, every week, every month, every year, and a lot of time is simply spent finding things to write uncritically. Once one has put that outside himself or herself, it tells you structure, narrative art, thematic destination. One of my older students years ago referred to it as "Mitchell's messy method."

. . . A writer pretty nearly has to have a space that's intended only for writing. A special desk. His typewriter there. That makes it easier to be consistent. Because with writer's block . . . what you've got to say to yourself is not, "I must write *War and Peace* this morning." You've got to say to yourself, "Oh, I've had my breakfast. Now, I go to this place and I sit down and I start typing." Now, that's a simple thing to make yourself do. And that's why the space is so important.

Once the writer has that space, the important thing is consistency. It has to be every day, every week, every month, every year. No gaps. I've used the analogy in the past of fishing. No idiot would say, "Oh, I'm only going out on the stream when there's a nymph or a mayfly hatch, and they're stupid and unselective, and I'll catch my limit of champion fish." What he has to do is course that stream every day, and he'll be there when the trout rise and take his hook. The writer has to do the same thing on his typewriter.

The genesis of a work can start with quite a vivid and entrancing character you've known in the past. . . . Or a writer can start with an incident. But I like to start first from an insight. In other words, a thematic or philosophic thing. For each piece of work, it's different. And it's so simple and almost unconscious. . . . In the end, for me, the important thing is the truth about the ways of humans in the universe. And you know, it isn't new. There's no new thing under the sun. I think thematic approach is the first, the beginning, of a piece of work.

The big problem of a novelist is, if he's a man, he can't have a unisexual world. He's got to have women in there. If he's got women in there, he's got to know what makes women tick. He's got to know how a woman feels and what her inner conversation is. I think that for a white person to write about red people, would be for a man to write about the other sex, or for a woman to write about the other sex. That creative leap. I don't think anybody has every made that crossover nearly so well as our Alice Munro. . . . I think that's the toughest leap. The other ones you can manage.

from **THE VANISHING POINT**

Early in October they took up the vanishing point.

Mostly it was accomplished with the ruler, and it was a lot like geometry, only fun. Lower on the art paper than a person would think, the horizon had to run clear across. Then the vanishing point must be marked. It didn't have to be exactly at the centre, Old Kacky said, but a little to the left of centre if a person wanted. Perhaps because he hadn't been listening carefully, he got his off to the right, but because it was the very start he was able to correct his mistake. The next step Old Kacky gave them was to rule two lines wide apart at the bottom of the page, squeezing down to the vanishing point on the horizon. They travelled up the sheet, actually. These lines were the edges of the highway; another would determine the tops of the telephone poles, and on the opposite side of the road there was one to limit the height of the fence-post tips. Before the drawing was nearly done, there was a great skein of lines, very faintly traced, funnelling to the vanishing point.

When his drawing was finished, it was shocking; his eye travelled straight and unerring down the great prairie harp of telephone wires strung along tiny glass nipples of insulators on the cross-bars, down the barbed-wire fence lines on the other side of the highway. And as the posts and poles marched to the horizon, they shrank and crowded up to each other, closer and closer together till they all were finally sucked down into the vanishing point.

There wasn't the faintest shadow or smudge from the temporary guiding lines; he'd rubbed them out carefully with the corner of his art eraser. No accidents as the yellow cube rolled off springy crumbs that reminded him of skin from the wrinkled backs of his heels and his knee-caps when he towelled after a hot bath. He could not get over how doing something so crazy should end up looking just right. Things didn't look the way a person thought they did at all.

But very soon—before art period was over—his drawing didn't satisfy him. Empty. It needed something. Maybe a meadowlark on a fence post—a kill-deer near the road—goshawk hung high. A tiger wouldn't do, of course, unless he put in a circus tent for it to have got loose from. Nothing dangerous went slinking along the highway or the C.P.R. tracks over prairie. There were no man-eating plants or quicksand around Sadie Rossdance's three little cottages; nor did lions and leopards prowl down after dark to drink from Tourigny's swimming hole. Deadly five-minute snakes and hooded cobras, walnut-coloured natives with white turbans on their heads, and rocking giraffes with necks like swaying telephone poles lived far away in their native land—or in *Chums*—or on the screen of the Hi-Art Theatre, where Mel's father played the piano and drums for Ken Maynard and Charlie Chase and Harold Lloyd. This, in a way, gave Mel an extra right to them; he also claimed special knowledge of stinging scorpions because his Aunt Vera was in the mission fields of India for the Western Baptists.

The drawing had to have something more—some gophers, like tent pegs—clump of wild roses—buck brush. That was it! A tree! In the front and to the left, as high as

the first telephone pole, he put in a poplar the way Old Kacky had showed them to make poplars. And then another—a pine on the other side of the road, almost half way to the horizon. They looked great! Maybe some gophers and the curved Vs of flying . . .

Oatmeal! He looked back and up over his shoulder. Old Kacky in the aisle reached down, took up the drawing. As he looked at it, his scalp turned scarlet.

"My office!"

With the drawing in his hand, he followed Carlyle there. He closed the office door. He went round the desk. He dropped the drawing. He sat down.

"All right. Why did you do that?"

Badly as he wanted to, he could not find the reason that he had put trees in his drawing. It had been a sort of an accident.

"You knew we were doing the vanishing point and perspective. You were told to do that. Simply."

He nodded.

"But you went ahead—you disobeyed. Put those trees in as well as the fence and the telephone line."

He nodded again.

"Deliberately."

He nodded

"Haven't you anything to say—any explanation—excuse?"

He did know that Old Kacky was not interested in an excuse, whatever its excellence. "No, sir . . . it . . . just happened."

"It couldn't. The trees had to be outlined. They had to be shaded. Coniferous or deciduous—they can't draw themselves. Can they?"

"No, sir."

"So, you put them in deliberately."

"I guess I did, Mr. Mackey."

"Do you mean you know you did?"

"Yes, I guess . . . yes, sir . . . I knew—know—after they happened—accidentally."

"What?"

"I mean after they—after I happened to think them—doing them—putting them in there—then I—drew them deliberate."

"Deliberately."

"Deliberately."

"What if a boy did this sort of thing in arithmetic? History? Geography? Do you see what I mean?"

"Yes, Mr. Mackey."

"Deliberate disobedience."

"Yes, sir."

"You know I have to strap you."

"Yes, sir."

Five on each hand. Nothing before in his eleven years of life had hurt that much.

After Old Kacky had put the strap back into its drawer, he told Carlyle that he had conducted himself well and in a manly fashion. He said Carlyle could remain in the office for five minutes before returning to the classroom.

As soon as Old Kacky had closed the door behind himself, Carlyle thrust the incredible pain between his legs; with one

knee lifted, he squeezed the hurt, then, with wrists loose, tried to shake off stinging drops. He rubbed his hands up and down on the front of his pant legs.

With some surprise he realized that he was not sorry for the trees at all. It wasn't trees he'd thought of putting—first. A tiger—with satisfied jowls and lovely stripes shaded in with his art pencil. But a tiger would have been ridiculous on prairie. So would Old Kacky. He'd be safe enough on prairie unless he broke his leg and lay out there in forty-below; or maybe in spring, when they ganged up for mating, coyotes might catch his smell and ring him and wait for him to die! In the deep rain-forests or the rubber jungles of the Amazon, though, he'd be in trouble. His strong, scared, oatmeal scent would telegraph him to head-hunting Indians and black, man-eating jaguars. Boa constrictors went by smell too. Yes! Behind the flat head—just like a sack of coal struggling in the boa constrictor's neck!

The pain had completely evaporated; his palms were just warm now. Red as sunburn. He could see there was a slight puffing. His hands trembled. He couldn't stop them; it was a little like looking at them through the lifting drift and shimmer of heat waves. They blurred. Then they starred. He looked up and away from them to the picture over the filing cabinet. The soldiers had bloodied bandages round their heads, just like Billy Blake's handkerchieves, or the newspaper wrappings left over from the farm kids' sandwiches' hemorrhaging strawberry jam. Two artillery horses lay in their harness, all tangled up, legs thrust out into the air as though they didn't belong to them. The legs had been stuck onto their bloat bellies. And now he could read the brass plate underneath: SOMEWHERE WITH A VETERINARY UNIT IN FRANCE. Donated to Sir Walter Raleigh School by KITCHENER OF KHARTOUM CHAPTER IODE.

Suddenly he realized how very still it was in Old Kacky's office. And lonely. Here he stood by himself, and outside the office walls were all the others properly together and busy all around his own empty desk. He had vanished him from them. Old Kacky had vanished him from them to vanishment. And then the really crazy thought happened. He was being vanished from himself . . . stepping outside and apart and walking farther and farther from himself, getting smaller and smaller and smaller . . . dwindling right down to a point.

FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DISCUSSION

1. In the excerpt from the novel, *The Vanishing Point*, Carlyle Sinclair has a sudden thought: Old Kacky has "vanished" him from himself. What might Carlyle mean by this?

2. What is your response to Carlyle as presented in the excerpt? Is he a sympathetic character?

3. W.O. Mitchell has often been described as a "prairie writer." Does this mean he only appeals to people who live on the prairies? If not, how does he appeal to readers everywhere, while focusing on one region?

   What is universal about the excerpt from *The Vanishing Point*?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Read *The Vanishing Point*. Is Carlyle a static character? Does his personality change during the course of the novel?

2. How does Carlyle's childhood encounter with Old Kacky affect his adult personality?

3. What is the relationship between Carlyle and Victoria? What inhibits him from recognizing his love for her? How does he overcome these inhibitions?

4. What is the significance of the novel's title?

RELEVANT WORKS

Mitchell, W.O. *Jake and the Kid*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1961. 184 p. Short stories. Winner of the Stephen Leacock Medal for Humour.

_____. *The Vanishing Point*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1973. 393 p. A novel.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

William Ormond Mitchell was born in 1914 in Weyburn, Saskatchewan. He completed high school while in Florida for health reasons. After completing an education degree at the University of Alberta, he taught in rural Alberta schools. By this time, Mitchell had had articles published in magazines and, in 1944, decided to adopt a writing career. He was fiction editor of *Maclean's* (1948-1951), and from 1949 to 1957 wrote weekly scripts for his CBC radio series, "Jake and the Kid." Thirteen of these were later published as *Jake and the Kid* (1961) and the book won the Stephen Leacock Medal for Humour. Mitchell's first novel, *Who Has Seen The Wind?* (1947) was followed by *The Kite* (1962), *The Vanishing Point* (1973), and *How I Spent My Summer Holidays* (1981). Five of Mitchell's plays—*The Kite, The Black Bonspiel of Wullie MacCrimmon, For Those in Peril on the Sea, The Devil's Instrument*, and *Back to Beulah* are collected in *Dramatic W.O. Mitchell*.

W.O. Mitchell has been a writer-in-residence at several universities and helped establish the creative-writing courses now offered each year at the Banff School of Fine Arts.

A conversation with

ALICE MUNRO

I always thought of myself as a writer . . . just as I thought of myself as a human being. There was no distinction. I never considered anything else. I didn't think of it as a way that I would have to make a living. I didn't consider any of the practical aspects. And often people say, "How could you think of becoming a Canadian writer?"—because it was something that we didn't have very much of—but that didn't occur to me either. I didn't think that I would be a writer. Actually, I thought that I was a writer.

I feel very uneasy when I'm not writing, and even though I know now with experience that these periods will pass, I never believe it. I always think that this is the end of writing and that I had better hurry up and find another career. And then I put on a very brave front and talk about what else I'm going to do and how much I'm going to enjoy it. But I'm never, in these periods, quite myself.

. . . I had a very definite writer's block between the ages of about twenty-eight and thirty, which I think from experience is probably the most difficult time in life. . . . I was overwhelmed at that time with the gap between what I could actually do and what I had dreamed of doing. My confidence, up until the age of twenty-five, was tremendous. And then I had to become more realistic. And as I did, the shortcomings of every word I put on paper, everything I did, seemed appalling to me. Finally, I became paralysed. I actually could not complete a sentence on the typewriter. And that, I think, is authentic writer's block.

There's a long time between the conception and starting to write, and the difficulty is that you can't really control it. And all our training is to learn to control things. We go to school and we learn how to study. And we learn how to apply ourselves so that we can write essays and so on. None of this is any good at all to writing fiction. I just sit and drink coffee a lot and look at the wall or look out the window or go for walks, always feeling vaguely guilty because this is very unproductive as far as I can see. And then either things pull together or they don't. You also have no guarantee that after all this process you're going to wake up one morning and it's going to be there. You may not do so. And then, you may also, in this period, start writing first draft, and it's very bad. I used to do this when I was younger. I would see how bad it was and I would tear it up and throw it out in desperation. Now I know that it's been this bad every time, so I just keep on, finish it. So that's the first stage.

I do a lot of re-writing. Some stories take more re-writes than others, so there's no hard-and-fast rule about that. Some things I've been able to write in about four drafts. And the re-writing isn't polishing as people think. It's re-conceiving. You're changing the style. The style isn't something superficial. The style changes because you're telling the story differently, you're seeing it differently.

I don't write with an audience in mind at all. I just feel that there's something I want to be written. I think someone said something—was it [J.D.] Salinger?—about writing the book you wish you could read, but I don't even go quite that far. I want to make this thing. It's like making an object. And then, of course, I send it out. It's not that I put things away in the drawer. I'm not at all fussy that way. But I don't consider the audience when I write.

When I'm writing, I don't think at all about what would be successful, though I like to be successful as a writer and as a person. When I'm writing, I have very little control over what I write. When I was younger, publishers were telling me "We want a novel. We'll look at your stories after you've written the novel." And even after I had written *Dance of the Happy Shades*, which was critically successful but not at all financially successful, I was still told that a novel would be very welcome. And I thought to myself, not only for reasons of sales but to prove I could do it, I had to write a novel. I would push myself then to do things that I thought I had to do. *Lives of Girls and Women*, which

was my second book, fell apart in a way and became more a series of stories than a novel. But now I am just so pleased if I can get one thing done. I don't press to do anything I can't do.

I owe a considerable debt to the writers of the generation or two before me. When I was in high school, I can remember reading Hugh MacLennan's *Two Solitudes* and being enormously excited by the fact that here was a Canadian writer and a Canadian book. It was such a rarity. I read a book at the same time called *Earth And High Heaven* by a Toronto writer [Gwethalyn Graham], and with the same excitement—that it mentioned places in Canada. So I hadn't really had any doubt that one could use Canada for literary purposes, but this was enormous encouragement at a time when I needed it.

I can't really be sure how living in south-western Ontario has affected my writing. Obviously, it's given me a lot of what I write about. But that seems to me a superficial thing. I think I could have grown up in Montreal or California and I would still be trying to find the same whatever-it-is I'm trying to find in life and people that I've been trying to find in southwestern Ontario. . . . I think, in a way, that's just the window dressing of one's writing. It gives you the furniture, in a way. But what is central to the writing, what I can't describe very well, is that it doesn't matter where you live. I don't know how living in Canada has affected my writing because I've almost never lived outside Canada; I think you have to—in order to be able to see. I can't see anything that makes me a Canadian writer. I just am a Canadian writer, as I am a woman writer. And it's not something I ever think about. I don't really go in for analysis at all.

I don't know about my being in the mainstream of Canadian writing. I don't really know what the mainstream is. I think there are individual books, and some writers write quite a few books or get a lot of publicity, and that's the mainstream. But we who are living in this time can't possibly tell what books will be remembered. Maybe some novel, some writer that we consider quite obscure, will be the great Canadian writer of this time. We can't see that very clearly ourselves. I never feel in or out of any mainstream or school of writing. As a working writer, I react a bit differently if I'm around writers and listening to talk about writing than when I'm living by myself in the country. There are both positive and negative things about this. When I'm with other writers—when I'm hearing a lot about writing as literary gossip—I get more competitive and I tend to think about getting something done. When I'm all by myself in the country, it often seems such a very peculiar activity that in a way the solitude is good. A lot of times I feel that I should be doing something that adults do. So I need a bit of both.

My ideas of success as a person are very commonplace. I would like to have been a good mother and to have had some good relationships. And that's enough; that's hard enough.

I'm not sure why I chose short stories in the beginning. I was reading them a lot when I started to be a serious reader. But I always used to think it was a matter of time. I had small children and a household to keep. I couldn't imagine taking six months out of that. I could imagine writing hard for three weeks or a month and then getting caught up on all the things I'd neglected, but I didn't think that I could keep a novel in my mind long enough. But now I have plenty of time to write. I no longer have these responsibilities and I still write stories. So, obviously, this is just a surface explanation and something else is operating, but I can't be sure. I think I don't write plays at least partly because I'm appalled to think of the other people one has to work through. Rather than welcoming this help as the genuine playwright does, I want to be able to get through by myself.

I think I first wrote "Who Do You Think You Are?" in quite another form. I can't even remember this very well. Maybe there are two stories joined together there in some way. That often happens. Right at the centre of that story is the story of the village idiot who would say odd things and would always do a performance in front of the town. I remember hearing this anecdote. But the anecdote was not that there was a village

idiot and he did these things, but that there was an imitator who began to imitate the village idiot and tell stories about him. He was the figure that interested me. Somehow this story is incorporated in the story of my narrator, who is an actress, and in the story of her feelings when she comes back to the town. This is a kind of roundabout progress. The connections in a story are not too logical—at least in mine they're not. They're intuitive in a way. I will put things together simply because I feel they belong together and I have no defence as to why I did that.

"Forgiveness in Families" is another story that started with an anecdote. Not all my stories start that way. Sometimes they start with just a scene. But that one is almost completely the original anecdote. The mother is dying, and the son comes with this preposterous group of friends and his kind of prayers, and she gets better. And outside this is the good child, watching the whole procedure. What becomes interesting, of course, is the sister's feelings. It's a fairly straightforward story.

. . . I really wish that all my stories would be presented as something to be enjoyed. I'm not happy about anything that gets between enjoyment and the reader. Questions you have to answer, or things that you have to watch for, or the theme to be picked out. And then, of course, I realize that not everyone will enjoy the story, but I'd rather have an immediate reaction. I would like to think that my stories in schools didn't come as part of the baggage you have to take on with being at school but were just a part of the world that you can respond to any way you like. The way you do when you turn on a television program and say "I like this" or "I don't like this." But I know that's not so in school because you have to pay attention and then perhaps answer questions.

from **FORGIVENESS IN FAMILIES**

I've often thought, suppose I had to go to a psychiatrist, and he would want to know about my family background, naturally, so I would have to start telling him about my brother, and he wouldn't even wait till I was finished, would he, the psychiatrist, he'd commit me.

I said that to Mother; she laughed. "You're hard on that boy, Val."

"Boy," I said. *"Man."*

She laughed, she admitted it. "But remember," she said, "the Lord loves a lunatic."

"How do you know," I said, "seeing you're an atheist?"

Some things he couldn't help. Being born, for instance. He was born the week I started school, and how's that for timing? I was scared, it wasn't like now when the kids have been going to play-school and kindergarten for years. I was going to school for the first time and all the other kids had their mothers with them and where was mine? In the hospital having a baby. The embarrassment to me. There was a lot of shame about those things then.

It wasn't his fault getting born and it wasn't his fault throwing up at my wedding. Think of it. The floor, the table, he even managed to hit the cake. He was not drunk, as some people thought, he really did have some violent kind of flu, which Haro and I came down with, in fact, on our honeymoon. I never heard of anybody else with any kind of flu throwing up over a table with a lace cloth and silver candlesticks and wedding cake on it, but you could say it was bad luck; maybe everybody else when the need came on them was closer to a toilet. And everybody else might try a little harder to hold back, they just might, because nobody else is quite so special, quite so center-of-the-universe, as my baby brother. Just call him a child of nature. That was what he called himself, later on.

I will skip over what he did between getting born and throwing up at my wedding except to say that he had asthma and got to stay home from school weeks on end. . . . Mother said he could have been brilliant at school if he wanted to be. That's a deep one, your brother, she used to say, he's got some surprises in store for us. She was right, he had.

. . . . . .

He lives at home, off and on, has for a year and a half. His hair is thin in front, not surprising for a man thirty-four years of age, but shoulder-length behind, straggly, graying. He wears a sort of rough brown robe that looks as if it might be made out of a sack (is that what sackcloth is supposed to be, I said to Haro, I wouldn't mind supplying the ashes), and hanging down on his chest he has all sorts of chains, medallions, crosses, elk's teeth or whatnot. Rope sandals on his feet. Some friend of his makes them. He collects welfare. Nobody asks him to work. Who could be so crude? If he has to write down his occupation he writes priest.

It's true. There is a whole school of them, calling themselves priests, and they have a house over in Kitsilano, Cam stays there too sometimes. They're in competition with the Hare Krishna bunch, only these ones don't chant, they just walk around smiling. He has developed this voice I can't

stand, a very thin, sweet voice, all on one level. It makes me want to stand in front of him and say, "There's an earthquake in Chile, two hundred thousand people just died, they've burned up another village in Vietnam, famine as usual in India." Just to see if he'd keep saying, "Ve-ery ni-ice, ve-ery ni-ice," that sweet way. He won't eat meat, of course, he eats whole-grain cereals and leafy vegetables. He came into the kitchen where I was slicing beets—beets being forbidden, a root vegetable—and, "I hope you understand that you're committing murder," he said.

"No," I said, "but I'll give you sixty seconds to get out of here or I may be."

So as I say he's home part of the time now and he was there on the Monday night when Mother got sick. She was vomiting. A couple of days before this he had started her on a vegetarian diet—she was always promising him she'd try it—and he told her she was vomiting up all the old poisons stored up in her body from eating meat and sugar and so on. He said it was a good sign, and when she had it all vomited out she'd feel better. She kept vomiting, and she didn't feel better, but he had to go out. Monday nights is when they have the weekly meeting at the priests' house, where they chant and burn incense or celebrate the black mass, for all I know. He stayed out most of the night, and when he got home he found Mother unconscious on the bathroom floor. He got on the phone and phoned *me*.

"I think you better come over here and see if you can help Mom, Val."

"What's the matter with her?"

"She's not feeling very well."

"What's the matter with her? Put her on the phone."

"I can't."

"Why can't you?"

I swear he tittered. "Well I'm afraid she's passed out."

I called the ambulance and sent them for her, that was how she got to the hospital, five o'clock in the morning. . . . When they let me in to see her she was bluish-gray in the face and her eyes were not all-the-way closed, but they had rolled up, the slit that was open showed the whites. She always looked terrible with her teeth out, anyway, wouldn't let us see her . . . They were out now. So all the time, I thought, all the time even when she was young it was in her that she was going to look like this. . . .

About seven o'clock that night Cam turned up. He was not alone. He had brought along a tribe of co-priests, I suppose they were, from that house. They all wore the same outfit he did, the brown sacking nightgown and the chains and crosses and holy hardware, they all had long hair, they were all a good many years younger than Cam, except for one old man, really old, with a curly gray beard and bare feet—in March, bare feet—and no teeth. I swear this old man didn't have a clue what was going on. I think they picked him up down by the Salvation Army and put that outfit on him because they needed an old man for a kind of mascot, or extra holiness, or something. . . . He brought the troupe . . . into the waiting room and there, right before my eyes, they started. They put the old man in the center, sitting down with his head bowed and his eyes shut—they had to tap him

and remind him how to do that—and they squatted in a rough sort of circle round him, facing in and out, in and out, alternately. Then, eyes closed, they started swaying back and forth moaning some words very softly, only not the same words, it sounded as if each one of them had got different words, and not in English of course but Swahili or Sanskrit or something. It got louder, gradually it got louder, a pounding singsong, and as it did they rose to their feet, all except the old man who stayed where he was and looked as if he might have gone to sleep, sitting, and they began a shuffling kind of dance where they stood, clapping, not very well in time. They did this for a long while, and the noise they were making, though it was not terribly loud, attracted the nurses from their station and nurses' aides and orderlies and a few people like me who were waiting, and nobody seemed to know what to do, because it was so unbelievable, so crazy in that ordinary little waiting room. Everybody just stared as if they were asleep and dreaming and expecting to wake up. Then a nurse came out of Intensive Care and said, "We can't have this disturbance. What do you think you're doing here?"

She took hold of one of the young ones and shook him by the shoulder, else she couldn't have got anybody to stop and pay attention.

"We're working to help a woman who's very sick," he told her.

"I don't know what you call working, but you're not helping anybody. Now I'm asking you to clear out of here. Excuse me. I'm not asking. I'm telling."

"You're very mistaken if you think the tones of our voices are hurting or disturbing any sick person. This whole ceremony is pitched at a level which will reach and comfort the unconscious mind and draw the demonic influences out of the body. It's a ceremony that goes back five thousand years."

"Good Lord," said the nurse, looking stupefied as well she might. "Who are these people?"

I had to go and enlighten her, telling her that it was my brother and what you might call his friends, and I was not in on their ceremony. I asked about Mother, was there any change.

"No change," she said. "What do we have to do to get them out of here?"

"Turn the hose on them," one of the orderlies said, and all this time, the dance, or ceremony, never stopped, and the one who had stopped and done the explaining went back to dancing too, and I said to the nurse, "I'll phone in to see how she is, I'm going home for a little while" . . .

I didn't mean to but I fell asleep on the couch, after the drink and the long day. I woke up with the phone ringing and day lightening the room. I stumbled into the kitchen dragging the blanket Haro had put over me and saw by the clock on the wall it was a quarter of six. She's gone, I thought.

It was her own doctor.

He said he had encouraging news. He said she was much better this morning.

I dragged over a chair and collapsed on it, both arms and my head too down on the kitchen counter. I came back on the phone to hear him saying she was still in a critical

phase and the next forty-eight hours would tell the story, but without raising my hopes too high he wanted me to know she was responding to treatment. He said that this was especially surprising in view of the fact that she had been late getting to hospital and the things they did to her at first did not seem to have much effect, though of course the fact that she survived the first few hours at all was a good sign. Nobody had made much of this good sign to me yesterday, I thought. . . .

Disappointment. That was the word that stayed with me. I was so glad, really, grateful, but underneath I was thinking, so Cam didn't kill her after all, with his carelessness and craziness and going out and neglecting her he didn't kill her, and I was, yes, I was, sorry in some part of me to find out that was true. And I knew Haro knew this but wouldn't speak of it to me, ever. That was the real shock to me, why I kept shaking. Not whether Mother lived or died. It was what was so plain about myself.

Mother got well, she pulled through beautifully. After she rallied she never sank back. She was in the hospital three weeks and then she came home, and rested another three weeks, and after that went back to work, cutting down a bit and working ten to four instead of full days, what they call the housewives' shift. She told everybody about Cam and his friends coming to the hospital. She began to say things like, "Well, that boy of mine may not be much of a success at anything else but you have to admit he has a knack of saving lives." Or, "Maybe Cam should go into the miracle business, he certainly pulled it off with me." By this time Cam was saying, he is saying now, that he's not sure about that religion, he's getting tired of the other priests and all that not eating meat or root vegetables. It's a stage, he says now, he's glad he went through it, self-discovery. One day I went over there and found he was trying on an old suit and tie. He says he might take advantage of some of the adult education courses, he is thinking of becoming an accountant.

I was thinking myself about changing into a different sort of person from the one I am. I do think about that. I read a book called *The Art of Loving*. A lot of things seemed clear while I was reading it but afterwards I went back to being more or less the same. What has Cam ever done that actually hurt me, anyway, as Haro once said. And how am I better than he is after the way I felt the night Mother lived instead of died? I made a promise to myself I would try. I went over there one day taking them a bakery cake—which Cam eats now as happily as anybody else—and I heard their voices out in the yard—now it's summer, they love to sit in the sun—Mother saying to some visitor, "Oh yes I was, I was all set to take off into the wild blue yonder, and Cam here, this *idiot*, came and danced outside my door with a bunch of his hippie friends—"

"My God, woman," roared Cam, but you could tell he didn't care now, "members of an ancient holy discipline."

I had a strange feeling, like I was walking on coals and trying a spell so I wouldn't get burnt.

Forgiveness in families is a mystery to me, how it comes or how it lasts.

FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DISCUSSION

1. In the story, "Forgiveness in Families," Val experiences disappointment when she learns that her mother did not die. What is the root of this disappointment?

2. Alice Munro writes about ordinary people. The situations in which many of her characters find themselves are familiar to many readers, yet she is able to make her stories interesting. How does she achieve this? Do you recognize yourself or your family in "Forgiveness in Families"? How does she make such a common situation—conflict in a family—significant?

3. The author remarks in the interview, "I really wish that all my stories would be presented as something to be enjoyed. I'm not happy about anything that gets between enjoyment and the reader. Questions you have to answer, or things that you have to watch for, or the theme to be picked out." Can literature be taught? Should it be? Does classroom discussion help or hinder the enjoyment of someone's writings?

4. Alice Munro explains, "There's a long time between the conception and starting to write, and the difficulty is that you can't really control it. And all our training is to learn to control things. . . . None of this is any good at all to writing fiction." Is creativity subject to control?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. The Canadian artists Alex Colville and Ken Danby are sometimes called "magic realists." Examine some of the paintings of these artists, and see if you can discover why Alice Munro's fiction is sometimes compared, in style, to their work.

RELEVANT WORKS

Munro, Alice. *Dance of the Happy Shades.* Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1968. 224 p. Short stories. Winner of a Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction (1968).

_____. *Lives of Girls and Women.* Scarborough, Ont.: New American Library of Canada, 1971. 211 p. A novel. Winner of the Canadian Booksellers' Award.

_____. *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You.* Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974. 246 p. Short stories.

_____. *Who Do You Think You Are?* Toronto: Macmillan, 1978. 206 p. Short stories. Winner of a Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction (1978).

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Alice Munro was born in Wingham, Ontario, in 1931. She began writing in her teens and, after studying English at the University of Western Ontario, started submitting short stories to magazines and to the CBC program, "Anthology." She has lived in Vancouver and Victoria, and now resides in southwestern Ontario, where many of her stories are set.

Her first collection of short stories, *Dance of The Happy Shades*, was published in 1968. *Lives of Girls and Women* followed (1971) and was dramatized on CBC in 1973. In 1974, *Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You* was published, and, in 1978, *Who Do You Think You Are?* Her most recent collection, *The Moons of Jupiter*, was published in 1982.

A conversation with

bp NICHOL

I was born in Vancouver in 1944. My dad worked for the CNR, so we moved regularly as clockwork every four years. Dad came home and said, "I've got some good news and some bad news." And the good news was always that he'd been promoted, and the bad news was always that we moved. So . . . I was raised in various parts of Western Canada.

My parents were both fanatic readers. My dad, as long as I've known him, has read a book a night, if not two books a night, and my mother was always a pretty steady reader. And so there were always books around the house, and I got books as gifts. . . .

I started off by writing poetry. . . . It seemed to me the best way to focus on craft was through poetry because poetry makes you pay attention to the nuances of language. Like the differences between the word "tug" and the word "pull," and the kind of things those differences generate in a reader.

I used to say that if you can survive high school and still love poetry, you must really love poetry. And that had to do with the way it was taught at that time. Basically kids were taught, as I was, to be frightened of poetry. That is to say, poetry had a hidden meaning, and you were a dummy if you couldn't figure out the hidden meaning. So, you weren't taught the pleasure of the text. . . . You weren't taught as you are, in music, to just take the pleasure from hearing the sounds. . . . I knew when I came out of high school and was writing poetry that I really loved poetry. . . .

When I'm writing poetry, I very often just start with a word or maybe a line. I will let what occurs at the moment occur. I will track what is occurring in the moment. If I think it's worth preserving, I'll preserve it. And if I think it's garbage, I chuck it in the wastebasket. The strength of process is that you move closer to the way the mind actually operates in the moment of composition. The weakness of process is that if your mind hasn't moved on in terms of thought, in terms of what your focus is, you basically end up writing the same poem over and over again. But you do . . . have to prepare for any sort of writing that involves process by thinking, by letting your ideas develop, and by allowing your mind to move with those ideas and grow in the process.

My big advice to young writers is to write. Write lots. Write lots and lots and lots and lots. And if you like writing, go and hear other writers read. Go and hear how the words they write sound coming out of their mouths, because that's a real revelation. That's my second point for them. My third point would be, if nobody else wants to publish your work, publish it yourself. One nice thing about writing is it's really easy for writers to seize the means of production and produce their own works. And you can sell them on the streets. You can give them to friends. . . . If it's bad writing, you'll find out. And, which brings me to my fourth point, you should really struggle to get over oversensitivity.

If you're going to write, and if you literally want to communicate with other people, there's going to be people who love your work and there's going to be people that hate your work. And, to a degree, that's literally their right.

I think there's nothing wrong with writing that doesn't reach a very big audience. I think the problem comes when you're writing that way and you feel really robbed because the world is not beating a path to your door. . . . that's a crazy way of thinking. You should have a pretty good grasp of the kind of writing you're doing, which you can get by going back to the beginning. Which is to say, you can only get to it by writing lots and lots and learning, really learning, how to read your own writing. That's often the hardest thing for young writers to do. What they're reading is their intent. They read what was in their mind when they set out to write . . . look at the poem and . . . see in it everything that was their intention. And they think "Wow!" But someone else reads and they say, "I don't know what you mean."

And it's true they don't. Because most of the text is still inside the writer's head. So the more you write, the more you get a handle on that.

. . . a poem [of mine] called "A Small Song That Is His" is from a book called *Love, a book of remembrances*. The title *Love* has to do with, of course, love of the alphabet. And the remembrances have to do with the fact that we remember not only images but that we remember them in language, and through the alphabet. And in many of these poems, literally what I was doing was discovering that I could write single letters in what I felt to be poetic patterns, and creating my own rhythms and text with them so that, with the mixture of single letters and words and so on, I could create things that moved closer to being just music. . . .

"Hours 13 and 14 from the Book of Hours" is the second part of *The Martyrology, Book VI*. Each of the hours is composed in a particular hour of the day, so that I literally sit down and compose, say, this 13th hour between 6:35 a.m. and 7:35 a.m. The particular movement in this series is based, well, based on the fact that Ellie's and my first child was stillborn and deals with that reality and the movement out of that reality. There's a reference to a book of the Chinese poet, Wong Wai—it's called *Hiding the Universe*—and a number of quotes from his work, and a reference to another called *Glimpses of Vanished Originals*, which was a book about art that no longer exists.

Midway through my long poem, *The Martyrology Book III*, I got really, really depressed with the poem and that was when I came to the realization that the whole thing was based on a model of nineteenth-century classical music. I don't even like nineteenth-century classical music. . . . [the realization] was coming to me through other long poems I was reading and the cadences that were influencing them. And that's really what pushed me into the formal change that goes on near the end of that book of *Martyrology*, and the subsequent books of *Martyrology*.

A lot of my work is based on an almost mystical, magical belief in the power of language. The power of words to communicate larger senses and larger experiences that exist, to a certain degree, as things almost in themselves. Works in themselves, through which you enter other worlds and are in contact with them.

I'm a believer in using very few adjectives and adverbs. I think, particularly with the adjective, that basically when you use it, you're saying "My noun is weak. My noun does not convey the meaning." So one of my feelings was, instead of trying to qualify the life out of nouns, why not try and re-energize them? Why not use them in ways that, through the rhythm of what you're doing and the context of what you're doing, you invest those nouns with the power they have? . . . The power lies in naming. Like all the rituals that you read, for instance, in fantasy and science-fiction stories or gothic literature, around the notion that, if someone knows your secret name, they have power over you. That whole thing. So the power, in a real sense, I think, resides in the name and the noun.

One way to explore the poem was on the page through visual poetry. Since the poem spends its life on the page, why not then deal with the page as the life of the poem? The equal and opposite approach was saying, "Since the poem and performance exist in the air and is in that sense transitory, then why not work with sound poems? Why not work with poems whose life is for the instant of performance?"

One of the things that happens when you begin to focus on the poem on the page, of course, is that you become aware of the alphabet in a kind of absolute sense. I became very aware of the alphabet, shapes of letters, which is why I started spelling my name with the lower case "b" and the lower case "p." Simply because of the synchronicity of the "b" and the "p". . . .

One of the things I realized about the alphabet was that when you write the name of something, like if I write the name "tree," I'm referring to something outside of me. I might be thinking of an oak; you might be thinking of a maple. One of the nice things about the alphabet, just as itself, is that when I write an "A," the letter "A," I bring the letter "A" into the world. So that there is this very

direct experience of creation that happens, in a real sense, with the alphabet. I'm not just giving you the sign for something that's out there; I'm giving you, in a literal sense, the thing itself. This is not that exciting to a cast of thousands, but it really, it really got me, emotionally speaking. Where I lived.

And one of the things that then began to happen was that I began to, yes, I began to write poems that just consisted of letters. And I also began to start to look at words as if they were sentences. . . . the easiest illustration of that is the word "word." If you look at the word "word," it says, "W" or "D." As it happens, "W" is four letters from this end of the alphabet; "D" is four letters from that end of the alphabet. In the word "word," they're flipped around. On the one hand, so what? It's a chance occurrence. On the other hand, there's a certain magic in the fact that it is that way. So I began to think of that as just sort of a pataphysical motion, to use the term "pataphysic," which means "on another whole thing" . . . that is to say, I build an imaginary staircase, a fiction, if you like. I know it's fiction; I know it's imaginary, but I walk up those imaginary stairs, I get to the top, I open this imaginary window, I look out—and there's the real world. And I see it from an angle I wouldn't see it from otherwise.

There's a book of mine called *Translating, Translating,* which is literally a book of research. It's examples of I tried this, I tried that. They're all manipulations of the same text. . . . If it interests you, or if it's a total snooze, that's fine by me. There are other pieces in which, yes, what I've done is I've built the imaginary staircase and what I'm saying is, "put on your golden slippers and climb that golden stair. Because if you go this way with me, you're going to see things you wouldn't see otherwise."

A SMALL SONG THAT IS HIS

adore adore
adore adore
an opening an o
an h a leg a table or
a window & a w
a sky that is d
a lake that is f
e

d e f
f f f f
d d
e e e
d f f e f e
f e f e

me
you or me or
i h & d
m e
e f d
o

d f h e w
f
f e w h d
o
w d
f

from continental trance (the third book of *The Martyrology Book VI*)

whistle

pulling over the level crossings
in the gathering dark into Edmonton

drainage ditches gleaming in the last light
clusters of buildings & trees

as night falls the sky reverses
dark clouds against a lighter blue

& the mind reverses
sleep takes
loosing the dream you

two hours from Saskatoon
fingernail of moon in the eastern sky
the pastel gray clouds at dawn
blow over the pinkening horizon
train gathering speed all the while
the berth shakes back & forth &
forth over the prairie

the revelation is in the blue dome of air
beneath which this train & the dawn appear
as blue as the robin's egg i found age two
shattered on the sidewalk
bits of curved blue flung all about
& the train of thot it lead to

as blue as that imagined sky that day
when the clouds were white
& the prairies lay over the mountains
in my future

in Hornpayne

the sign on the building i could see from the road read “OTHING”
i reconstructed as “NOTHING”
because it looked like it was falling down

a north thing called “nothing”
that as Ellie & i drew closer
i read, suddenly, as “CLOTHING”
windows boarded up & broken

like my life-long wish
that i might clothe myself finally in belief
& realize:

the name of death is “NOTHING”
the name of after-death is “NOTHING”
accept Lord Mother/Father
the briefness of this life you’ve granted
this bliss

mist again at dawn

heading into Toronto
"end" translates "home"

7 a.m.
August 2nd
1981

St Clair to Union Station
thru the junkyards, the backyard gardens,
decaying brick factories

scrawled across the one wall
I WANTED TO BE AN ANARCHIST

an ending
in itself
unending

Hour 13

6:35 a.m. to 7:35 a.m.

briefly

the heart does break
the aching muscle in the chest
carries more than the weight hangs from the body
from the barely perceiving brain
buried under the weight of loss
of grief
brief moment of clarity
stillborn
i never know him
never name him
bury him under the greening tree in the shadow of the old stone wall
falls away from us
into the earth at birth
unborn again

when our son died
i feared ellie'd die too
a gnawing in the mind
blind terror
i held her all night
just to keep her to me

tho the heart pounds
the will shatters
you are broken
his spirit dead
our spirit

in this world
too quick

without explanation
gone

drove into the countryside
hours on the road to point pel]e
south to the very bottom
skipped stones onto the lake
flick across the surface &
gone

into another world
like my sister donna
dead at six weeks

or ellie's brother robert
dead at two years

into the slow dissolve of memory
a life
love's loss
passes
this grief
's past
in time
caring
awake all night &
past us
slipped thru that gap between the living & and the dead
on
past this passing & this grief's hold
gone who was never ours to hold
past us
briefly
a life
time's alike
less thru loss
& yet
the loss at last passes too
of us
no "baby makes three"
not ours
alive or dead
illusion of possession slips past us
GOD IT ALL SLIPS PAST US
so briefly

FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DISCUSSION

1. The author says he found he could write single letters in what he felt to be poetic patterns, creating his own rhythms and text with them, so that the mixture of single letters and words created things that move closer to being just music. Discuss the concept of poetry as music with reference to "A Small Song That Is His."

2. Listen to bp Nichol reading his poetry on the television program. Does his performance contribute to your enjoyment of his poetry? In what way(s)?

3. In the television program, the writer says that "A Small Song That Is His" has content. Do you agree? If so, then what is this poem about?

4. Nichol believes in using few adjectives and adverbs. He prefers to "re-energize" nouns rather than "qualify the life" out of them. Discuss the use of nouns in his poetry.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Note the lack of punctuation in "Hour 13" and the way in which the poem is laid out on the page. Write an essay on how structural and textual devices such as type size, spacing, case, and layout contribute to the meaning of the poem.

RELEVANT WORKS

Nichol, bp, ed. *The Cosmic Chef: An Evening of Concrete; Poems by Margaret Avison and Others.* Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1970. 80 p. bp Nichol was awarded a Governor General's Literary Award in 1970 (Poetry) for the visual book *Still Water* (1970), the booklets *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid* (1970) and *Beach Head* (1970), and *The Cosmic Chef* (1970).

_____. *The Martyrology.* Toronto: Coach House Press, 1972-1976. 4 v. in 3. Poems.

_____. *Love: a book of remembrances.* Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1974. 132 p. Poems.

_____. *Translating Translating Apollinaire.* Milwaukee, Wisc.: Membrane Press, 1979.

_____. *continental trance.* Lantzville, B.C.: Oolichan Books, 1982. Poems.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Barrie Phillip Nichol was born in Vancouver in 1944. His early reputation was based on his visual poetry, which was exhibited in North and South America, Europe, and Japan in the 1960s. In 1970, he co-founded "The Four Horsemen," a sound/performance group which has toured extensively in North America. He has performed his own sound poetry on record and cassette, as well as with The Four Horsemen on further records and cassettes. In 1972, he and Steve McCaffery co-founded the Toronto Research Group, which has issued periodic reports, particularly on the nature of narrative and translation, and he has edited the anthology, *Canadian Pataphysics* (1978).

Nichol has edited and co-edited several anthologies including *The Cosmic Chef: An Evening of Concrete* (1970) and, with Steve McCaffery, *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue* (1978). He has published numerous books of both poetry and prose including *The Martyrology: Books I & II,* (1972), *Books III & IV,* (1976), *Book V,* (1982), and part of *Book VI, continental trance* (1982), *As Elected: Selected Writing* (1980), *In England Now That Spring . . .* (with Steve McCaffery, 1979), *Still* (1983; winner of the 5th Annual International Three-Day Novel Writing Contest), *Craft Dinner* (1978), and *Translating Translating Appollinaire* (1979). He is also one of six contributors to the multilingual translation project *Six Fillious* (1978) and has produced a number of books for children, including *The Man Who Loved His Knees* (1983), and *Once, Moosequakes and Other Disasters* (1985).

A conversation with

SHARON POLLOCK

I began acting in high school. I think I was president of the Drama Club. And from there I went on to various amateur clubs and ended up working professionally. In the late sixties, I came out [from the Maritimes] to join a group called the Prairie Players, which was touring western Alberta, and, I guess, eastern B.C. I ended up playing every grain-elevator village in the West, and it struck me that we were doing mostly American and British plays. They were successful, and people liked them, but it seemed to me we had our own stories to tell. I had my story to tell . . . and I somehow felt that we were cheating those people whose lives we entered by the theatre . . . . I wanted other actors to stand up and say my words, to speak directly through an experience I shared with those other Albertans and Canadians. And so, I turned to writing.

. . . I think the piece that is most closely associated with the West is *Generations.* I saw the land as a character and I tried to examine the relationships of three generations of one family . . . their connections with the land, and how that had altered from the original great-grandfather, who had come out in 1905, to the present generation. I looked, as well, at the relationship of the women, through the men, to the land. We see the grandson's girlfriend, the girl he hopes to marry, who isn't sure whether she really wants to be what she considers a martyr or sacrifice to that compelling need the men seem to have to serve that farm, that land. She looks at the mother of her fiancé and tries to examine whether she really can commit herself, the way that she sees the mother has done.

There are always plays that are landmarks, when you look back to where you are, at a particular time, in the art and craft. For me, *The Komagata Maru Incident* was one of those plays. I started to explore structure, and it was exhilarating, and I decided that I never wanted to write a naturalistic play again. Most of that early work—*Komagata* and *Walsh*—was plays that were based on issues or events, and I wasn't so interested in character. As *Komagata Maru* was a step forward for me, I think, in structure, *Generations* was a step forward for me in character. All of a sudden, the story, the event or the issue, became less important. What I mainly got interested in were those characters, what happened to them. I suppose some people might feel that the work suffered as a result of the lack of plot, and a lot of character, but what I then did was, I think, move on with that grasp of character.

. . . In *Blood Relations,* I tried to match a more innovative, creative, and theatrical structure with what I had learned about character in *Generations. Blood Relations* is about Lizzie Borden, an axe murderess from 1892. In my basement, I have the greatest collection of really ninth-rate murder mysteries in the history of the world, and I read them constantly. In *Blood Relations,* I found a matching of a kind of dreadful interest in murder and blood and gore—which one doesn't like to admit in public—with a character that I began to identify with. And that was Lizzie Borden, the murderess. She was a lady that made decisions. She didn't like where she stood and she tried to do something about it. I like to make decisions, too. We're not so dissimilar. (I haven't taken to going at anybody with an axe, but that may come.)

In 1981, *Blood Relations* received a Governor General's Award. Now, I feel really strange about that. I don't want to seem ungracious, but I have a real reluctance to believe that, in something like literature or the arts, you can award a prize, as if something was the best that was ever written that year. I simply don't believe that. But, it's important to me, because it recognized my contribution. And, in recognizing my contribution, I think it recognizes the contribution of all the playwrights who didn't get awards that year. What we do is valuable, and this is a way of saying that to us. I don't like to think of myself as an artist. I think I'm a worker. I'm

a worker in the theatre. Time makes art. I don't make art. I suppose this play may be around after I'm gone, but I don't care about that. I want to talk to people today.

. . . *Doc* is my most recent play and . . . it's still very close to me. People seem to be fascinated as to whether it's an autobiographical play. First of all, it isn't—any more than any other play I've written hasn't been autobiographical, conscious or subconscious. It's a little bit too close, still. I can't say where it fits into the spectrum, whether it's good, or whether it's bad. I sometimes say, when I read the critics, well, they tell me that. And then, I go to university classes, and they ask me what the theme of the play is, and I ask them, and if I agree with what they say, then I say "Yeah, that's the theme." I wouldn't say that I would go along with the public, or the critical evaluation of *Doc,* because I think that I have my own standard that I adhere to. Or attempt to attain. I guess that would be a better way of putting it. But where *Doc* is, I don't know. I'll be rewriting it after the show closes, looking at it again, and moving on.

from **GENERATIONS**

BONNIE: What do you think? You must have some opinion on the subject. When you sit down to talk, you and Alfred, what're you going to say?

MARGARET: I don't know.

BONNIE: I know. You're going to agree with whatever Alfred says. No matter how you feel, you're going to agree with whatever the "men" in the family decide.

MARGARET: I often do.

BONNIE: You always do. I've never seen you once disagree—how do you do that?

MARGARET: Do what?

BONNIE: Always be here . . . cooking and cleaning and agreeing . . . how do you do that? Don't you get tired of doing that? *Pause.* I . . . could never do that, you see. I could never . . . I don't want to do that.

MARGARET: You just don't know your own mind.

BONNIE: At least I have one . . . I didn't mean that.

MARGARET: Oh . . . you probably did . . . I always thought . . . we liked one another.

BONNIE We do.

MARGARET: I suppose you see me . . . in a very particular way.

BONNIE: I admire you, I—

MARGARET: Do you?

BONNIE: No . . . I don't. I . . . marvel at you . . . I don't admire you. I marvel at . . . how you can submerge yourself in all this. Be nothing but . . . an extension of this . . . I would not want that to happen to me.

MARGARET: I don't feel *submerged* — I am *tired* on occasion.

BONNIE: I'm afraid of that happening to me.

MARGARET: Why?

BONNIE: Why? . . . Because . . . I don't want . . . to lose *myself.*

MARGARET: Lose *yourself*? Lose yourself . . . And what would you know about loss? . . . It's true I might not have a mind, but I do have a memory, and I remember the thirties. I remember us all huddled round the radio hopin' for somethin' to get us through the next day, and what did we get? Bennett babblin' about managin' money, when none of us had any money to manage. Oh yes, the Nurlins were lucky, they hung on to this place but some of us, we weren't so lucky . . . My father, first he lost his livestock, then his faith, and in the end the bank took what was left, so we moved to the Hat and lived hand-to-mouth, God knows how . . . When I met Alfred Nurlin, and he asked me to marry him, I knew I had a chance to be part of something again . . . And you talk about losin' yourself? Are you so special, so fine, so wonderful, there's nothin' bigger worth bein' part of? . . . Good . . . You be whole then, be complete, be self-sufficient. And you'll be alone. And in the end, you'll be lonely.

Flash of lightning, rumble of thunder. Bonnie exits to look at the sky.

ALFRED: Look at that.

BONNIE: Happenin' somewhere.

ALFRED: Heat lightnin'.

Flash of lightning, rumble of thunder.

BONNIE: It reminds me of summers when I was a kid . . . I used to be scared of lightning.

ALFRED: Yup.

BONNIE: I used to be scared of. . . . I think I was born in the wrong place. . . . I should've been born in . . . oh, I don't know . . . New Brunswick. Have you ever been there?

ALFRED: Nope.

BONNIE: It's . . . domesticated there. I mean, little trees and little hills and little towns—like you laid out a province on one of those boards you get for an electric train set . . . little phoney trees and bridges and towns. It's like Munchkin Land—but you can relate to it. That's where I should've been born. *Alfred smiles.* I mean here, I've always been afraid of the spaces. How can one person relate to the prairies? Maybe that's the trouble.

from **BLOOD RELATIONS**

LIZZIE: You're a doctor, isn't that right?

DR. PATRICK: Right enough there.

LIZZIE: So, tell me, tell me, if a dreadful accident occurred . . . and two people were dying . . . but you could only save one. . . . Which would you save?

DR. PATRICK: You can't ask questions like that.

LIZZIE: Yes I can. Come on, it's a game. How does a doctor determine? If one were old and the other were young—would you save the younger one first?

DR. PATRICK: Lizzie.

LIZZIE: You said you liked games! If one were a bad person and the other was good, was trying to be good, would you save the one who was good and let the bad person die?

DR. PATRICK: I don't know.

LIZZIE: Listen! If you could go back in time . . . what would you do if you met a person who was evil and wicked?

DR. PATRICK: Who?

LIZZIE: I don't know, Attila the Hun!

DR. PATRICK: *Laughs.* Oh my.

LIZZIE: Listen, if you met Attila the Hun, and you were in a position to kill him, would you do it?

DR. PATRICK: I don't know.

LIZZIE: Think of the suffering he caused, the unhappiness.

DR. PATRICK: Yes, but I'm a doctor, not an assassin.

LIZZIE: I think you're a coward.

Pause.

DR. PATRICK: What I do is try to save lives . . .

LIZZIE: But you put poision out for the slugs in your garden.

DR. PATRICK: You got something mixed up.

LIZZIE: I've never been clearer. Everything's clear. I've lived all of my life for this one moment of absolute clarity! If war were declared, would you serve?

DR. PATRICK: I would fight in a war.

LIZZIE: You wouldn't fight, you would kill—you'd take a gun and shoot people, people who'd done nothing to you, people who were trying to be good, you'd kill them! And you say you wouldn't kill Attila the Hun, or that stupid cow's life is precious—*My life is precious!!*

DR. PATRICK: To you.

LIZZIE: Yes, to me. Are you stupid!?

DR. PATRICK: And hers is to her.

LIZZIE: I don't care about her! *Pause.* I'm glad you're not my doctor, you can't make decisions, can you? You are a coward.

Dr. Patrick starts off.

FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DISCUSSION

1. In the first excerpt from *Generations*, Bonnie and Margaret have a conversation in the farm kitchen. Bonnie is afraid that she will "lose" herself, in the same way she feels Margaret has. Which character do you sympathize with?

2. In the second excerpt, Bonnie and Alfred have a conversation about the prairies. What qualities of this region might explain Bonnie's reactions to it?

3. In the excerpt from *Blood Relations*, Lizzie confronts a doctor with some of her ideas. Why is a doctor a useful foil for Lizzie in this scene?

4. Lizzie's primary criticism of Dr. Patrick is that he cannot make decisions. Is there a clear-cut answer to her position?

5. Sharon Pollock's early works, such as *Walsh* and *The Komagata Maru Incident*, have been described as historical plays that deal with social and moral issues. More recent plays—*Generations* and *Blood Relations*—have been described as character studies. Some critics have suggested that because Pollock is now interested in character, she is no longer interested in social and moral issues. Is this criticism valid? Can social and moral issues ever be divorced from character?

6. In the interview, the playwright remarks, "I have a real reluctance to believe that, in something like literature or the arts, you can award a prize, as if something was the best ever written that year." Is it possible to judge accurately what is "best" in one of the arts?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. *The Komagata Maru Incident* deals with an instance of racism in Canada. Is reading or seeing a play like this a successful way of teaching values such as tolerance and understanding of minority groups?

2. Does Sharon Pollock deal with social and moral issues in *Blood Relations*? If so, what are these issues?

RELEVANT WORKS

Pollock, Sharon. *Walsh.* Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1973. 112 p. A play.

_____. *The Komagata Maru Incident.* Toronto: Playwrights Co-op Press, 1978. 47 p. A play.

_____. *Blood Relations and Other Plays.* Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1981. 200 p. (Prairie play series; no. 4) Includes *Generations* and *One Tiger to a Hill.* The title play was the winner of the first Governor General's Literary Award for (published) Drama.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Born Sharon Chalmers in Fredericton, N.B. in 1936, Sharon Pollock grew up in the Eastern Townships of Quebec and attended the University of New Brunswick. Active in amateur theatre in New Brunswick, Pollock later toured Western Canada with the Prairie Players. In 1966, she won an award for Best Actress at the Dominion Drama Festival for her performance in *The Knack*.

Her first play, *A Compulsory Option*, was written in 1971, and was followed by *Out Goes You* (1973), *Walsh* (1974), *The Komagata Maru Incident* (1978) and *One Tiger to a Hill* (1980). *Blood Relations* (1980), a play based on the life of Lizzie Borden, who was tried for the axe-murder of her parents in New England in 1892, was followed by *Generations* (1980), *Whiskey Six* (1983), and *Doc* (1985). She has also written plays for children and numerous radio scripts. In 1980, she was awarded the ACTRA Nellie for Best Radio Drama for *Sweet Land of Liberty*.

Sharon Pollock has been a playwriting lecturer at the University of Alberta (1976-1977) and head of the Playwrights' Colony at the Banff School of Fine Arts (1977-1979).

A conversation with

AL PURDY

My education was very sketchy. I went to Dufferin Public School in Trenton, but I didn't do well enough—lousy at literature. Eventually, I went to Albert College for a year, where they could hammer some education into me. And that was terrible because I ran into a kid who bullied me unmercifully. He was about half my size, and he'd been reading English school papers, whereby there are fags and prefects and things. I was very impressionable at the time, and I got bullied all over the place. It took me a while to escape that. Then, I went back to Trenton. I was about 185 pounds by the time I was fourteen or fifteen. I played football and wrote poems by this time—trying to show off, of course. The first poem I wrote got a dollar from the school magazine. I thought that was an easy way to make a buck. But it wasn't. It was a long time before I made another buck from it. Anyway, that's what they call, in quotations, home background.

I had an interest in poetry . . . I thought if I wrote a poem I would get some attention, which I did. And I was reading Bliss Carman, which no present-day, modern poet in Canada would ever admit. . . . I was reading Robert Louis Stevenson. I was reading G. K. Chesterton. It was at the time when you had to memorize the stuff. So I memorized it, and I still remember it.

I suppose that I write primarily for myself. You have to do that. Presumably, if you are clear in your own mind and write clearly enough, it is some kind of "voyage of discovery." (You have to use clichés about this sort of thing. Then, other people will understand it and appreciate it, too.) But, primarily, it has to be for yourself and nobody else.

. . . I wrote plays years ago. I must have had twelve or fifteen on the CBC. . . . And I wrote short stories that were published. But it's a lot more work than poems, and I hate work. It is against my principles. However, I once also started to write a novel. I got to 16,000 words and I realized what awful crap it was, and I gave it up. I had ridden the freight trains at the age of sixteen, and I started to write a novel about riding the freight trains. But it was simply too bad.

I think a poem begins with an idea that you want to explore, find out about, because when you have the idea, you don't know where it's going. If you're writing a novel or a short story, a lot of the time you know how it's going to end and how it's going to turn out. But I never know with a poem. Also, a poem starts from a phrase, or merely a thought which you have to know something more about. There's a concentration about writing in which it seems that the brain concentrates better. I have no idea how. I don't particularly want to know how. I think possibly the conscious and the unconscious get together, and the unconscious makes the conscious unconscious, and the conscious makes the unconscious conscious . . .

I suffer from writer's block all the time. I think that prose writers are lucky. They don't think so. They think they have writer's block and so on. But, nevertheless, if you sit down at a table with a blank sheet of paper in front of you, you can generally make some scribbles on it and say something. And if you're a painter and you've got a canvas, you can generally make a few splashes of color. But, I just don't think you can write a poem, unless you can write a poem. That's all. Just wanting to is not going to be enough. It's kind of mysterious. And, of course, that's a good thing. It's nice to be mysterious.

I don't think I have any goals in writing, in literature. I never think of myself as writing literature at all. It seems to me a revolting word. I put it in the same category as "inspiration," which also sounds awful. I think I simply want to write well. I want to because, in writing well, you can feel the things you write. It's sort of an unexpected continuation of the original feeling. If you're writing about something that's far in the past,

you're continuing it into the present. And probably, since you realize that full well . . . then this continuation is far more intense than the original feeling. It's nice to have all these electric feelings flow through one. One feels vital and alive at the time. Not a vegetable. . . . I remember working in factories years ago. I would get angry sometimes, and I was so tired all the time, too. It's an awful feeling. I think that people who work at monotonous jobs like that are very unlucky. I think I've been very lucky in being able to escape all that.

Theme and philosophy in my own poetry . . . it's certainly not anything that occurred to me very much. I suppose that, in many ways, one tries to portray what it's like to be alive, to have all the emotions. I certainly don't think of it as philosophy. The existentialists are said to invent themselves every day, every time they wake up, and I suppose we all do. We can all go along with that. To carry being alive a step further—that's all I think of it, I suppose.

Remembered as a writer? I give myself—considering how long it's going to take all the school books to go out of print— maybe fifty years. I'd be lucky or unlucky, as the case may be, if it lasted any longer. But, how do I want to be remembered? I think I would like to be thought of as, shall we say, a good writer. Not a phoney. A writer who used everything he had, all the equipment, whatever it might be, who didn't back away from too many things. . . . I think that, in another fifty years, language is going to change, and the very equipment that we have here today is all going to evolve and change. Maybe even the typewriter will be gone. However, I don't think it's very relevant to think of yourself around another fifty years. When we die, we die, and that's it.

My own reading? . . . certainly poetry. I try to keep up with all the new stuff that's coming along. I read novels to a degree, but my boredom level is much lower than it used to be. I like, of all things, the suspense writer John D. Macdonald. My own reading started when I went to school. When I went to Vancouver and I was writing—I was imitating Bliss Carman and all the bad, metrical poets—I met a drunken bookseller. . . . He said to me one time, "Purdy, you ain't read nothin'." So, I read Dylan Thomas on the interurban going to work at Vancouver Bedding, and I read [Feodor Mikhailovich] Dostoevsky, and I read [Marcel] Proust, and I've never been the same since. I thought at the time I'd never pick up another so-called good book. But I'm stuck with them. Anyway, I don't like nineteenth-century writers very much. No matter how great they are, I find it very difficult to wade through Proust or Thomas Mann or *War and Peace* . . . I'm very hard to please, I guess. However, poetry? I suppose I have a list in my mind of about twenty or thirty poets I think are great. . . . believe it or not, they're mostly English—of all things. And English people themselves are rather alien to me because we are all North American. I'm a lot closer to Americans than I am to any English person, but I think their poets are great.

My influences, of course, have been everyone. Everybody influences me. I'm just like a litmus paper. At one time, I was so influenced by Dylan Thomas that I began to sound like an echo chamber of him. But that's long over. I can trace so many influences that I think there's none. I was writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario about six years ago, and a guy came in. They all want to be called geniuses, of course. That's why they come in, to be reassured on that point. But I asked this guy who he'd read. He said "Nobody." I said, "Why not?" He said, "I don't want to be influenced." Now, that's terrible that a young writer doesn't want to be influenced. Anyway, my influences are all of them, everybody, including the people around me.

I don't think anybody could ever make a living as a poet alone. I did so many different things. I wrote short stories. I wrote plays. I wrote reviews. I even tried a novel one time, which was terrible. But, your name begins to get around. . . . Purdy can write that, they say. I had it happen fairly recently. I'd written a travel article about Mexico for this magazine called *Leisureways,* and the editor took it, to my great surprise. A week or two ago, he phoned up and said, "How would

you like to write an article about the town you grew up in?" What a great idea! I'd love to do it! I'd love to accept the cheque, too. Anyway, your name gets known, and then people ask you things like that. And they're so thrilled, which is kind of funny to me.

We moved here [to the Picton area of Ontario] from Montreal years and years ago when I was writing plays for CBC and had to write a dozen to get one accepted. And my wife was very displeased with this ratio of acceptance and decided that, if I could get away without working, she could. And quit her job. We came here and were prisoners in a grassy ghetto. We had no money. I'm not necessarily a country person and I hate, for instance, beautiful trees. Nevertheless, it did affect the way I wrote. I was forced into examining things a little more closely than I had before. As a result of being interested in it, I wrote a long poem called "In Search of Owen Roblin," who was one of the founders of the little village of Ameliasburg. It was once called Roblin's Mills. Incidentally, the mill was torn down, and the guts were taken up to Black Creek Pioneer Village. . . . I wrote about the mill that was torn down. In fact, I wrote two poems about it, and I can even quote a little bit . . . "and the wind-high ships/that sail from Rednersville/to the sunrise ports of Europe/are delayed somewhere/in a toddling breeze." . . . I wrote about a steeple in a poem called "Wilderness Gothic," . . . you echo your environment, and if you do a little bit better than echo, then you make something out of your environment. Anyway, I wrote countless poems about this area, and I'm sick to death of them. I can't stand it. I don't want to write any more of them. And please I never will. Enough is enough . . . I think of the way Earle Birney regards "David." He hates it. He doesn't want any more of it.

. . . I don't like to say that the country itself has a responsibility toward writers, and yet, writing itself is a good thing for any nation to have. It makes us see ourselves. It attracts the attention of people outside this country. However, it would be a great thing if writers got along well enough so that it wasn't necessary to help them in any way. But I've been helped a great deal at one time or another, and I don't mind. . . . the Canada Council has been a great thing, and the CBC earlier has been a great thing. Where would we have an audience? We turned our faces south for so many years, and now, suddenly we're beginning to look at each other. And that is a very good thing.

WILDERNESS GOTHIC

Across Roblin Lake, two shores away,
they are sheathing the church spire
with new metal. Someone hangs in the sky
over there from a piece of rope,
hammering and fitting God's belly-scratcher,
working his way up along the spire
until there's nothing left to nail on—
Perhaps the workman's faith reaches beyond:
touches intangibles, wrestles with Jacob,
replacing rotten timber with pine thews,
pounds hard in the blue cave of the sky,
contends heroically with difficult problems of
gravity, sky navigation, mythopeia,
his volunteer time and labour donated to God,
minus sick benefits of course on a non-union job—

Fields around are yellowing into harvest,
nestling and fingerling are sky and water borne,
death is yodelling quiet in green woodlots,
and bodies of three young bird have disappeared
in the sub-surface of the new county highway—

That picture is incomplete, part left out
that might alter the whole Dürer landscape:
gothic ancestors peer from medieval sky,
dour faces trapped in photograph albums escaping
to clop down iron roads with matched greys:
work-sodden wives groping inside their flesh
for what keeps moving and changing and flashing
beyond and past the long frozen Victorian day.
A sign of fire and brimstone? A two-headed calf
born in the barn last night? A sharp female agony?
An age and a faith moving into transition,
the dinner cold and new-baked bread a failure,
deep woods shiver and water drops hang pendant,
double yolked eggs and the house creaks a little—
Something is about to happen. Leaves are still.
Two shores away, a man hammering in the sky.
Perhaps he will fall.

MUSIC ON A TOMBSTONE

In Roblin's Mills old Owen Roblin
came almost fully awake in his lifetime once
owned 6 houses and built an octagonal one he
slept alone with his woman beside him
beard outside the quilts in zero weather
breath smelling of snoose and apple cider
dreaming not of houris and other men's wives
but his potash works and the sawmill hearing
only the hard tusked music of wheels turning
and hardly ever heard anything soft he
did know one March that June was early
(didst thou then old Owen hear the robins?)
built a gristmill and a village gradually
grew round it and the deep woods vanished and
his wife whelped every nine months eventually
he died in his sleep age 97
and everything ended

Note: Owen Roblin was born in 1806, died 1903. He built his gristmill and octagonal house in 1842, and the village of Roblin's Mills (now Ameliasburg) came into being. In 1914, Will Roblin, one of Owen's descendants rented the mill to a man named Taylor from Belleville, and Taylor prospered under this rental agreement. Then Will Roblin demanded a share in the profits. Taylor refused, and walked out. The mill never operated again, and the village declined—

ROBLIN'S MILLS (1)

The mill was torn down last year
and stone's internal grey light
gives way to new green
a shading of surface colour
like the greenest apple of several
The spate of Marthas and Tabithas
        incessant Hirams and Josephs
is stemmed in the valley graveyard
where the censored quarrels of loving
and the hatred and by golly gusto
of a good crop of buckwheat and turnips
end naturally as an agreement between friends
        (in the sandy soil
that would grow nothing but weeds
or feed a few gaunt cattle)—
And the spring rain takes their bodies
a little deeper down each year
        and maybe the earliest settlers
some stern Martha or speechless Joseph
perhaps meet and mingle
        1,000 feet down—

And the story about the grist mill
rented in 1914 to a man named Taylor
by the last of the Roblin family
who demanded a share of the profits
that poured golden thru the flume
because the new miller knew his business:
        & the lighting alters
        here and now changes
to then and you can see
        how a bald man stood
sturdily indignant
        and spat on the floor
and stamped away so hard the flour
dust floated out from his clothes
like a white ghostly nimbus
around the red scorn
and the mill closed down—

            Those old ones
you can hear them on a rural party line
sometimes
        when the copper wires
sing before the number is dialed and
then your own words stall some distance
from the house you said them in
        lost in the 4th concession
        or dimension of wherever
        what happened still happens
        a lump in your throat
        an adam's apple half
        a mile down the road
        permits their voices
        to join living voices
and float by
on the party line sometimes
and you hang up then
so long now—

ROBLIN'S MILLS (2)

The wheels stopped
and the murmur of voices
behind the flume's tremble
stopped
and the wind-high ships
that sailed from Rednersville
to the sunrise ports of Europe
are delayed somewhere
in a toddling breeze
The black millpond
turns an unreflecting eye
to look inward
like an idiot child
locked in the basement
when strangers come
whizzing past on the highway
above the dark green valley
a hundred yards below
The mill space is empty
even stones are gone
where hands were shaken
and walls enclosed laughter
saved up and brought here
from the hot fields
where all stories
are rolled into one
And white dust floating
above the watery mumble
and bright human sounds
to shimmer among the pollen
where bees dance now
Of all these things
no outline remains
no shadow on the soft air
no bent place in the heat glimmer
where the heavy walls pressed
And some of those who vanished
lost children of the time
kept after school
left alone in a graveyard
who may not change
or even grow six inches
in one hot summer
or turn where the great herons
graze the sky's low silver
—stand between the hours
in a rotting village
near the weed-grown eye
that looks into itself
deep in the black crystal
that holds and contains
the substance of shadows
manner and custom
of the inarticulate
departures and morning rumours
gestures and almost touchings
announcements and arrivals
gossip of someone's marriage
when a girl or tired farm woman
whose body suddenly blushes
beneath a faded house dress
with white expressionless face
turns to her awkward husband
to remind him of something else
The black millpond
holds them
movings and reachings and fragments
the gear and tackle of living
under the water eye
all things laid aside
discarded
forgotten
but they had their being once
and left a place to stand on

ABOUT BEING A MEMBER OF OUR ARMED FORCES

Remember the early days of the phony war
when men were zombies and women were CWACs
and they used wooden rifles on the firing range?
Well I was the sort of soldier you couldn't trust
with a wooden rifle
and when they gave me a wooden bayonet
life was fraught with peril for my brave comrades
including the sergeant-instructor
I wasn't exactly a soldier tho
only a humble airman
who kept getting demoted
and demoted
and demoted
to the point where I finally saluted civilians
And when they trustingly gave me a Sten gun
Vancouver should have trembled in its sleep
for after I fired a whole clip of bullets
at some wild ducks under Burrard Bridge
(on guard duty at midnight)
they didn't fly away for five minutes
trying to decide if there was any danger
Not that the war was funny
I took it and myself quite seriously
the way a squirrel in a treadmill does
too close to tears for tragedy
too far from the banana peel for laughter
and I didn't blame anyone for being there
that wars happened wasn't anybody's fault then

Now I think it is

MAY 23, 1980

I'd been driving all day
arrived home around 6 p.m.
got something to eat and slept an hour
then I went outside
and you know
—the whole world smells of lilacs
the whole damn world

I have grown old
making lists of things I wanted
to do and other lists
of words I wanted to say
and laughed because of the lists
and forgot most of them
—but there was a time
and there was this girl
this girl with violet eyes
and a lot of other people too
because it was some kind of party
—but I couldn't think of a way
some immediate plan or method
to bathe in that violet glow
with a feeling of being there too
at the first morning of the world
So I jostled her elbow a little
spilled her drink all over
did it again a couple of times
and you know it worked
it got so she winced
every time she saw me coming
but I did get to talk to her
and she smiled reluctantly
a little cautious because
on the basis of observed behaviour
I might be mad
and then she smiled
—altho I've forgotten her name
it's on one of those lists

I have grown old
but these words remain
tell her for me
because it's very important
tell her for me
there will come one May night
of every year that she's alive
when the whole world smells of lilacs

ONE THOUSAND CRANES

There is an old Japanese legend
that making a thousand cranes
folding them from coloured paper
allows the maker to have any wish
come true — at least anything reasonable
Surely it was not unreasonable
for a little girl to wish to live
as Sadako Sasaki did wish
tho ill of 'radiation disease'
since The Bomb fell on Hiroshima
Sadako folded 643 paper cranes
but never reached a thousand
and died in October 1965
at the age of 12
In Hiroshima near ground zero
of the atomic holocaust
Japanese schoolchildren across the country
built a monument to Sadako
and all those other dead children
From Hokkaido to far Kyushu
the children saved their yen
to build the Statue of the A-Bomb Children
with Sadako standing on top
still folding her paper cranes
as she did in life
When I visited the statue today
Sadako was there
and underneath in a sort of alcove
thousands and thousands of paper cranes
folded by the living children of Japan
For Sadako and all those others
the dead children of Hiroshima
The crane legend is very old
and certainly it isn't true
that if you fold a thousand cranes
Kwannon the god of children
will cool the radiation fever
And intercede with death for a child
Perhaps the Japanese schoolchildren
never believed the legend of a thousand cranes
but whether they believed it or not
they acted as if they did
and built the monument
— that seems important

HIROSHIMA

FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DISCUSSION

1. What makes "About Being a Member of Our Armed Forces" tragic as well as comic?

2. In *One Thousand Cranes*, why would it be important that the school children build the monument, whether they believe the legend or not?

3. The writer attached a footnote to his poem "Music on a Tombstone." Does the footnote help the reader to understand the poem? Should a poem be able to stand on its own without footnotes? What has more impact—the poem or the footnote? Why?

4. In the interview, Al Purdy remarks, "I think I simply want to write well . . . because, in writing well, you can feel the things you write. It's sort of an unexpected continuation of the original feeling . . . this continuation is far more intense than the original feeling. It's nice to have all these electric feelings flow through one." Contrast these comments of Purdy's with George Bowering's statement, "I hate writers who express how they feel about things." Should poetry be an expression of how a writer feels about things? Can it be anything else?

5. Purdy also says, "There's a concentration about writing in which it seems that the brain concentrates better. . . . I think possibly the conscious and the unconscious get together, and the unconscious makes the conscious unconscious, and the conscious makes the unconscious conscious." Describe in your own words what Purdy is saying about the partnership of the conscious and unconscious mind in writing.

   If he is right, what other experiences are like writing?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Find out who Albrecht Dürer is, then read "Wilderness Gothic." How might Gothic ancestors "alter the whole Dürer landscape"?

2. Al Purdy has edited poetry by Milton Acorn (*I've Tasted My Blood*, 1969). Read some of Acorn's poetry and view the television program about him. Why is Purdy appreciative of Acorn's poetry? What do these two writers have in common?

RELEVANT WORKS

Purdy, Al. *Poems for all the Annettes*. 3rd ed. Toronto: Anansi, 1973. 108 p. (First edition 1962, Contact Press; Second edition 1968, Anansi.)

_____. *The Cariboo Horses*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965. 112 p. Poems. c1965, 1972 by Alfred Purdy. Third printing 1976. Paperback. Winner of a Governor General's Literary Award for Poetry (1965).

_____. *Selected Poems*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972. 127 p. Selected by the author and introduced by George Woodcock.

_____. *The Poems of Al Purdy*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976. 61 p. (A New Canadian Library Original, No. 10.) With an autobiographical introduction by the author.

_____. *Being Alive: Poems 1958 - 1978*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978. 208 p. With an introduction by the author. Paperback.

_____. *The Stone Bird*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1981. 109 p. Poems. Paperback.

_____. *Bursting Into Song—An Al Purdy Omnibus*. Windsor, Ont.: Black Moss Press, 1982. 159 p. Selections, with new poems. With a preface by Marty Gervais and an introduction by the author in which he says that this book, and *Being Alive* and *The Stone Bird*, constitute his best work. Includes selections from *Poems for all the Annettes* to the present. Paperback.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Born in 1918 in Wooler, Ontario, and educated at Albert College, Belleville, Alfred Wellington Purdy worked in factories in the depressed 1930s and served with the Royal Canadian Air Force in World War II. Afterwards, he worked at a variety of odd jobs, and then began to support himself as a freelance writer, editor, and lecturer. He has also been writer-in-residence at a number of Canadian universities.

Purdy first began writing poetry in his youth. His first collection, *The Enchanted Echo*, was published in 1944. Twenty-four volumes and ten broadsheets have followed. Of the twenty-four, only three are selections: *Selected Poems* (1972), *The Poems of Al Purdy: a New Canadian Library selection* (1976), and *Being Alive: Poems 1958 - 1978* (1978). The first and the third of these titles are supplemented by new poems. In addition, Purdy has edited collections by Milton Acorn (*I've Tasted My Blood*, 1969) and Andrew Suknaski (*Wood Mountain Poems*, 1976); compiled three verse anthologies (*Fifteen Winds*, 1969; *Storm Warning*, 1971; and *Storm Warning II*, 1976); edited a critical evaluation of the United States (*The New Romans*, 1969); and written travel articles, critiques, book reviews, and radio and television plays.

A conversation with

JANIS RAPOPORT

I was born in Toronto. I grew up in Toronto . . . I went to a school called Keele Street Public School. After that, we moved to the Bathurst and Eglinton area.

. . . I don't think I read very much when I was young. I listened to the radio a lot, and perhaps that's where my imagination first got kindled, because, of course, when you listen to the radio you see it as well, somehow.

My work first appeared in print quite early. I was only twelve years old. My father was a transportation lawyer and he suggested that I write a story and submit it to a magazine. I had to write a story for English class anyway, so I submitted a story that he had told me. I put it in my own words. And this first story was published in . . . *Bus and Truck*, or some magazine like that. There was a gap of a few years, and then my work appeared in the high school yearbook quite regularly. I was the editor, literary editor, when I was in Grade Twelve.

I was always interested in drama. In fact, I wanted to become an actress, and so I feel . . . vindicated in a way that I did start to write plays and will continue, I hope, to write plays. I passionately, passionately wanted to be an actress. I took drama lessons. I was on the radio. I can't remember what it was called. "Children's Theatre of the Air" or something like that. One summer I went to . . . the national music camp and I played Anne Frank there. But my parents did not encourage me in this. In fact they discouraged me. I wanted to go to the National Theatre School, but that was absolutely forbidden. So I did some acting at university and, after that, I just didn't do it anymore.

My only experience in the nuts and bolts of play writing was the nine months or so I spent as a playwright in residence at the Tarragon Theatre in Toronto. I was with eight others, only one of whom did not have experience at writing plays. We were given a list of plays and playwrights to read during the year. We had deadlines for first, second, third drafts, whatever. We read these among ourselves and critiqued them. So it was a critical experience as well as a learning-how-to-write-plays experience. And then we chose directors, . . . and the director cast the show . . . it was done in a workshop situation, and members of the theatre community in Toronto were asked to come and see the final work. They were also invited to leave their comments, some of which were very helpful, in my case anyway.

. . . I have always been interested in mythology, and I think this informs my poetry, my plays, and my fiction. The first play I did was about a woman who was larger than life, both physically and in her aims and objectives. From there, I went on to do a work that was based on the Epic of Gilgamesh. And then *Dreamgirls* turned out to be more of a play of social realism. So I don't know about a consistent philosophy, except that I try to maintain some optimism. I try to reveal things, to explore, to discover, to find the truth in things. But I think someone else, later on, may be able to find some patterns in my work that I'm not even aware of.

I think the genesis of each work is different and depends on the work. With my play *Dreamgirls*, someone actually gave me the idea. . . . Now, I didn't really know anything about the subject [battered women], and I had to do some research . . . at one of the halfway houses in Toronto . . . and work as a volunteer and make my observations. The people at the house also called other women who had been residents. I interviewed, I don't know, countless, countless women, and some men as well. And, of course, I had the experience from having worked in the house to draw on. So that was deliberate research. And at the time I was doing the research I didn't know whether a play would come out of it or not. It was a chance I took. I interviewed two women who were like Ruth [a character in *Dreamgirls*], who were no longer living in the house. They did approximate the social status of Ruth. During the research, I found out that there are a lot of women in Ruth's situation, middle- or

upper-middle-class women who stay in very uncomfortable situations and who would like to get out of them . . . But I did make her situtation one in which she had no choice. I mean, she really didn't have any money, although she and her husband together had money, and he sort of took off, and she really didn't have an alternative. There were no relatives there, really, or anything. So she didn't have an alternative.

I wanted the women in the play to be characters, each her own character, her own self, in a real and theatrical and dramatic sense. But I also wanted to represent certain segments of contemporary society—different age groups—and also the different locales where people had come from. I felt they really had to mesh in the play and could, theoretically, exist in a transition house together. And, luckily, I found in my research that there were many different types of women in the house at the same time. I was fortunate that the idea that I had and the plan that I had for it actually could prove to work in reality.

Dreamgirls went through a lot of stages. It began first, actually, as a radio play which was written for the CBC but not produced, because the producer left and the new producer thought the material would be too risky, I guess. Then I was at the Banff Centre in the summer of '76, I think, and I took the radio material and all the research. I carried it there with me and wrote the first draft of what was to become the stage play. I think I had five weeks there. Sharon Pollock helped me, and I worked a little bit with Eric Steiner, and John Neville. A group of actors read the play at the end of the time. I don't know whether they thought anything would ever come of it because it was still pretty rough. Then I came back to Toronto. . . . did a workshop of the play. Then I had the summer and the early fall to rewrite it, and then we went into rehearsal in the fall, and it was first produced in January of '79. So it really did go through a great deal of transformation.

Dreamgirls has had several productions, and I've only attended a few of them. I felt that the audience reaction to the play was very positive, but, of course, people were very bothered by what they saw on the stage, and I think the men more so than the women.

Dreamgirls is a specific play about a contemporary social problem. There are two things that I would like people to get out of the play. I would like young people who have not experienced anything like the situations in the play to come away from a performance having an insight into these problems. Women and men who have been in such a situation and see the play may get a new perspective on it, and this may also open a dialogue among people who have been in that situation and people who haven't. There's really a wide gap in the two types of people - someone who's been in that situation, experienced violence, and someone who really is more of a voyeur.

I think a class of high school students would benefit from seeing a production of *Dreamgirls*, or, if that is not possible, from having some students who are especially interested in drama or theatre do a staged reading of it. And then I would like to see them discuss any issue that they felt was relevant from the play. I think that would be the best for students.

There are not many plays that you can take apart line by line. Shakespeare, you can, because his plays are so rich. I don't think it's always necessary, certainly not with *Dreamgirls*. It may be for my play, *Gilgamesh*, which is a very different play. It's full of images, and everything there is condensed from and relates back to the myth. So I think it depends on the play.

I would suggest that an aspiring playwright see as many plays as possible. I know it's expensive, but perhaps he or she could get in somehow to dress rehearsals or previews or something. I would suggest that that person read as many plays and as many different types of plays as he or she can lay hands on.

RUTH: No. We live right on the lake.

HAZEL: Oh, by the Bluffs? Hey, it's nice down there. I used to live by the sea. I'm from Halifax. You know where I'd really like to go? I'd like to go to Florida. My fianc], Bob, he wants to take me there. Soon as I get married again we're going there on our honeymoon. I'm engaged you know. Hey, that is a nice rock. Oooo! You know I used to have one like that. Mine was a bit bigger though. But then my old man, Bill, he pawned it on me. (*to living-room*) Okay, you guys, I've had enough. Upstairs, Helen. Yeah, well you can . . . Don't mouth off at me, Ralphie. You just get up there, okay? You can sit there and rot. (*throws dolls upstairs*)

(*RUTH turns off radio. HAZEL crosses back to kitchen*)

Gees, those kids.

RUTH: Doesn't your fianc] object to you being in a place like this?

HAZEL: It's temporary. You might say that Hazel's in transition. I was living in this joint, Regent's Park. You ever lived there?

RUTH: Oh no.

HAZEL: Well don't ever move there then. It's the pits. Gee, you know the floors, eh? They're one hundred percent concrete, and the kids kept tripping and scraping themselves in the halls. This time I'm going to do it right. Bob's thinking of getting us a place in Mississauga. (*pause*) So you got any kids?

RUTH: Two.

HAZEL: Oh yeah? How old are they?

RUTH: Adam's four and Tina's two-and-a-half.

HAZEL: Oh, I would've thought your kids'd be a lot older.

RUTH: You seem to know the rules around here. It's almost lunch time. Is it all right to feed my children when they're hungry or do I have to wait for lunch or dinner to be served?

HAZEL: Oh, feed them whenever you want. (*pause*) What happened? Well I mean did your old man leave you?

RUTH: Sort of.

HAZEL: Oh yeah, men . . . jerks. You're probably better off without him.

LINDA: Hazel, Bernie's got the peanut butter in the bathroom.

HAZEL: Bernie, get out of the bathroom! Jesus, kids! I guess you met Linda.

RUTH: Yes, I met her earlier this morning.

HAZEL: She interview you?

RUTH: No. Joan . . . Bradley.

HAZEL: Linda's better than her but let me tell you she's not the queen she pretends to be. You know what? She used to live in this joint herself.

RUTH: Really?

HAZEL: Here. Want a light? (*she has appropriated RUTH's lighter*)

RUTH: Thank you. (*pause*) I don't believe we've been properly introduced.

HAZEL: I'm Hazel. Hazel Blake.

RUTH: My name's Hixon. Hixon with an "x."

HAZEL: How do you do, Hixon?

RUTH: Mrs. Ruth Hixon.

(*Knocking on the door. Continues until HAZEL answers*)

HAZEL: Oh sorry. Mrs. Ruth Hixon. (*pause*) Coming.

RUTH: I was under the impression that only Linda was allowed to get the door.

HAZEL: Only if it's a guy. Linda gets all the guys. (*at door*) Home for the Battered, Brave but Bruised. May we help you?

VERA: Is place? Is number?

HAZEL: Sorry, can you—

VERA: Is house women?

HAZEL: Yes. C'mon in.

VERA: I got . . . I . . . I . . . I (*calling*)

HAZEL: Linda.

VERA: I got piece of paper.

HAZEL: You want a place for women?

VERA: Yeah.

HAZEL: Well you're okay here. (*calling*) Linda!

VERA: I sure my husband try to kill me.

HAZEL: Linda, come here. Hey, it's all right. It's okay.

VERA: I no place to go and . . . (*breaks down*)

LINDA: (*crossing from bathroom*) Ruth, will you get a cloth for her head please?

HAZEL: Hey, c'mon upstairs, upstairs you kids. (*throws remaining "children" upstairs*)

VERA: My husband he beat me all time now and before police tell me this place and I keep name on this paper and I keep with me. I don't know where to go.

(*RUTH returns with compress*)

LINDA: It's all right. You're safe here and you can stay here tonight. Do you understand? It's all right. No one will hurt you here.

HAZEL: I'll get some tea. (*brings tea during VERA's next speech*)

VERA: My husband Jovan, he have very bad day. He not want me go work. He get for me sometime like crazy, crazy jealous. He grab my hair and he bang my head into wall and he drag me to top of basement stair and he say to me, "Vera you have a cold heart, I going to put you in cold freezer." I know he kill me for sure. So I give him big push. He fall down stairs. He no moving. I run from house. I not know where to go.

LINDA: It's okay.

RUTH: If you'll excuse me, I think I'll just go upstairs. (*goes to her bedroom on second level*)

LINDA: Now, my name is Linda. I'm in charge here. Let me take off your coat.

VERA: Oh no. I not have on my good things.

LINDA: It's all right. C'mon, it's okay. Don't worry. This is your house too now.

HAZEL: Here, let me hang that up for you. (*crosses to kitchen*)

VERA: I still have my apron.

LINDA: Okay, now, does your husband know that you are here?

VERA: Oh, don't tell him, please.

LINDA: No. We won't. There are no men allowed in this house. You're safe here. Do you have any children?

VERA: Oh my girls. They in school and they come home and they—

LINDA: Where are they? What school?

VERA: Weston Road Collegiate School.

LINDA: Okay, I'm going to phone the school and I'll arrange to have them picked up this afternoon. You can go with me if you like.

VERA: All right. Thank you.

LINDA: I need some information from you about who you are, the name of your daughters, things like that. (*crosses to office to get form and returns immediately*)

HAZEL: Here, have a cup of tea. It's got honey in it.

VERA: I very sorry I make . . .

LINDA: It's all right, don't worry about it. Hazel . . . . later.

(*HAZEL crosses to kitchen*)

LINDA: The first question is: What's your name?

VERA: My name is Vera Misajlovska.

LINDA: Vera Misaj . . . how do you spell that, Vera?

VERA: I write for you.

LINDA: Vera Misajlovska. Where did you get a name like that from?

VERA: That Yugoslav name.

LINDA: So you must be a landed immigrant. How many years have you lived in Canada?

VERA: Four years.

LINDA: Why did you come to this country?

RUTH: (*still in bedroom on upper level*) We lived in England for almost twenty years. But then when we adopted the children, Richard felt that the atmosphere in Canada would be better for them.

LINDA: What languages do you speak? You speak English . . .

VERA: Not good English. I speak Greek, Macedonian, Serbo-Croat, Magyar.

LINDA: Did you live in all those places too?

VERA: I live Weston Road.

LINDA: No, I mean countries you've lived in. Where do you come from? What country?

VERA: I born Macedonia. But war come and all children sent to foster in Hungary. Stay ten year. After war I come back. I marry with Yugoslav.

LINDA: So under "marital status" I'll just put "married."

HAZEL: (*in kitchen*) Oh, I'm married. Yeah, but my husband died. Just up and died. We came here from Halifax and we were living, where was it, Regent's Park, and Bob, I mean Bill, took sick and died. It was awful and the kids were a mess. We had to go on welfare.

LINDA: Religion?

HAZEL: Jesus, this a really nice office. Is that a religious painting? Mine? Sorry. Oh, Catholic. We go to Mass on Sundays. Is there a church near here?

LINDA: Do you work?

RUTH: Oh yes, well, that is, I used to work as a volunteer. In Richard's hospital in England.

VERA: I work factory. Not today but soon.

HAZEL: Work? God, I work from the minute I get up in the morning till the minute I go to bed. Running around after five little buggers—kids, sorry—all the time. Oh, you mean a regular job? I worked in a canning factory in Halifax before I got married.

LINDA: Education?

HAZEL: Bernie goes to a special school. But he's fine. Oh, me? Put down between grade ten and grade eleven. It's different down home, you know.

RUTH: I didn't have any money and there was no one to turn to. I do have an aunt in Montreal. But she's seventy-eight and she couldn't cope with this problem. Richard and I had an argument at the beginning of December. It was December the third. And he walked right out of the house. I kept thinking he would be coming back because nobody ever leaves at Christmas time. And then I discovered all my charge accounts had been closed down and then the telephone was cut off and the hydro. And so I went to the bank and took out all the money that I had and I got us a room at the Park Plaza. Well that was the only place I could think of at the time. I tried to get in touch with Richard but his office kept saying he was on holidays. What with room service and the restaurants in that area, I only have thirty-five dollars left. (*pause*) No, oh, no, he never hit me.

HAZEL: What do you mean by physical brutality? Well my old man Bob, Bill, I mean Bill, he hit me occasionally, but only when he got drunk. Don't worry, I hit him back.

LINDA: Do you take any prescription drugs? We have to keep all the drugs locked up in my office. It's dangerous because of all the children around here.

HAZEL: Mind if I smoke? Oh, thanks a lot. Do you want one too? Oh, go ahead. I'll be bumming them from you before you know it. Oh, pills, I take some little white ones. Nerve pills. You see my nerves were shot after my husband died and the doctor he said to me, "Hazel, you take these pills at your own discretion." So I take them whenever I need them. Oh Bernie's got some, too, but I think his bottle's empty.

LINDA: Okay, Vera, that's it. All I need now is your signature. This just says that you're staying here because you want to.

FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DISCUSSION

1. In the interview, Janis Rapoport remarks, "I don't think I read very much. I listened to the radio a lot, and perhaps that's where my imagination first got kindled, because, of course, when you listen to the radio you see it as well, somehow." Would you agree that radio is a visual medium? More visual than television? Why or why not?

2. *Dreamgirls* began as a radio play. After reading it and seeing the excerpt in the television program, do you think that the play would have been successful on radio? More successful than televison? Why?

3. From the dialogue of *Dreamgirls*, what do you learn about the personalities and socio-economic status of Vera, Hazel, and Ruth?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Read the play *Dreamgirls*. Why would Janis Rapoport give her play such a title?

2. The playwright says that Ruth was in a situation in which she had no choice. Do you agree?

3. Janis Rapoport says that, after seeing *Dreamgirls*, people are often very bothered by what they saw on the stage, the men more so than the women. What was your reaction?

4. Janis Rapoport makes the statement that, in some ways, the victim of a battering situation allows himself or herself to be victimized. Would you agree?

5. Produce *Dreamgirls* or do a staged reading of the play. How does actually acting the play change one's thoughts or feelings about it?

RELEVANT WORKS

Rapoport, Janis. *Dreamgirls.* Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 1979. 47 p. A play.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Born in 1946 in Toronto, Janis Rapoport was educated at the University of Toronto, from which she graduated with a degree in Philosophy in 1967. Since 1968, she has pursued a career in writing, editing, broadcasting, and teaching. She was Associate Editor of Toronto's *Tamarack Review*, 1971-1982, a story editor for CBC TV Drama, 1973-1974, and playwright-in-residence at the Tarragon Theatre in 1974 and at the Banff Centre during the summer of 1975. Since 1973, she has given workshops, readings, and talks at schools, universities, and other institutions.

Her first collection of poetry, *Within the Whirling Moment*, appeared in 1967. *Jeremy's Dream* was published in 1974, and *Winter Flowers* in 1979. *Landscape*, a volume of poetry which she co-edited, appeared in 1977. In 1982, she co-authored a volume entitled *Imaginings*. For this work, she won a New York Art Director's Club Award of Merit (1983) and an American Institute of Graphics Arts Certificate of Excellence (1983).

A playwright as well as a poet, Rapoport's first play, *And She Could Eat No Lean*, was a workshop production in Toronto at the Tarragon Theatre in 1975, and at Wayne State University, Detroit, in 1976. *Gilgamesh* was produced in 1976 at Toronto's Theatre Balgar. Her most recent play, *Dreamgirls*, had its first production in Toronto at the Theatre Passe Muraille in 1979 and has since been staged in British Columbia, rural Ontario, and Prince Edward Island.

Currently the editor of *Ethos*, a Canadian-based international cultural magazine, Janis Rapoport also teaches creative writing at Sheridan College in Toronto, the city in which she lives with her family.

A conversation with

CAROL SHIELDS

. . . I have a much poorer memory of my childhood than people like W.O. Mitchell. I remember hearing him talk once and saying that everything that happens to you before the age of twelve is incised forever because it all happened for the first time. I wonder how universal that is. Because my childhood memories, for one reason or another, are not as incised as other people's seem to be. I think it was because I was a woolly-headed, dreamy sort of kid who spent a lot of time reading books.

. . . I lived in a really very protected, insulated little world, a WASP suburb of Chicago where everyone lived in comfortable houses and everyone went to university and everyone went to church. . . . People behaved themselves, generally. . . . When I think about innocence, I think, how could I have lived like that? It was like growing up in a plastic bag. There were many good things about it, of course: good schools and caring parents and good relationships with friends. . . . But I certainly had no idea how big the world was.

. . . My mother was a school teacher. She had taught school before she had had children, and, of course, in those days you had to stop teaching when you had children. . . . After the war, there was a teacher shortage and they reversed that policy, and she went back, first as a substitute teacher and then as a full-time teacher in the Grade Four and Five areas. And my father was the manager of a candy company. In fact, I can remember we used to say our papa makes lollypops. That was how we explained his vocation to our friends, and I think it was quite a secure family setting.

. . . The family went to the library regularly. I went to Saturday morning story hour, and for me that was very important as a kid. . . . I never missed those sessions. And I always remember one particular stormy Saturday when only four or five of us turned up. I realized that we were the fanatics who really needed this kind of experience far more than other kids.

I read a lot as a child and I was very lucky because no one ever said to me, as apparently people did to Alice Munro when she was growing up, "Why don't you get your nose out of a book for a change and go out and get some fresh air?" No one ever said that to me . . . and no one ever called me a bookworm or four eyes or any of that. It was quite acceptable to my teachers . . . that I liked to write poems and stories. They were wonderful women. They were all women, of course, and they were all unmarried women, all of my teachers. Wonderful, wonderful women and always encouraging, and I think that made quite a difference.

. . . I've always written. I can't remember a time when I didn't write. What I wrote in school . . . was highly artificial. I was writing in response to assignments, rather than writing stuff that I was interested in. Later, when I was living in Toronto . . . my husband suggested that I take a course in writing at the University of Toronto. I think he thought that I was becoming a bit overwhelmed by children and house and everything else. So one winter I did take a course.

In many ways it was not a good course. . . . The only thing I can remember the teacher saying was, when you send a manuscript, don't staple it—use a paper clip. That's the only thing I think I got out of the course, except, at the end of the course she actually asked us to write something. So I wrote a short story, gave it to her at the last session of the class, and forgot all about it. Two or three months later, she phoned. I could hardly remember who she was. She said, "I have just sold your story to the CBC." . . . Well, this was enormously thrilling to me, of course. Imagine, seventy-five dollars they paid. . . . So in the next few years I did a few more of these for them. . . . I was doing this in a very small way. About once a year, I'd get busy and write a story. You would have thought I'd be writing more of them but I simply didn't have the energy. I had these young children and I just didn't have enough energy to be doing a great deal of writing for a few years.

The biggest thing I would ever say to anyone who wants to be a writer is never save anything. Never save a story. Never keep it in your bag until you've found the right opportunity. Never save an image. Use it. I think once you use these things instead of storing them up for the big day when you are finally going to write, I think that what you find is that your supply is replenished. . . . My other advice is simply to read. . . . I can't conceive of anyone wanting to become a writer without first of all wanting to be a reader. I think that the way to learn to write is to read.

. . . I think every writer I've read has had an influence on me. I always wonder why writers deny influences. I think they are concerned about being thought derivative. But anyone who writes and reads—and I think that most writers do read—is bound to be influenced, just as you are influenced by every other element in your life. And I don't mind saying that I'm sure I'm influenced. For one thing, some of the writers I've read, like Mavis Gallant, for example, simply show you what is possible, where you can go in fiction. That is a lot roomier a form than I might have thought. . . . She is one of the ones I admire. I sometimes hear her referred to as a mere stylist, and I can never believe that people would take style so lightly. Style seems to me to be enormously important and not at all the final coat of paint that you put on a piece of work but something which is really integral with content or should be. . . . Care given to language is enormously important, and I'm not interested in reading writers who don't put that care into their prose. So I only read people that I suppose one thinks of as stylists.

Madame Bovary is a book that's meant more to me than almost any other, and a big part of that is the style in which it's written. And, of course, I'm absolutely astonished at the point of view in that story. I read it at the time that I was writing *Happenstance*, which is written from the point of view of a man. I came to [Gustave] Flaubert very late in my life . . . but was very interested to see how fully a man could enter into the mind of a woman and how unselfconsciously he was able to do that.

I read John Updike with enormous pleasure. I know there are people who find him trivial because of subject matter. I've never found him trivial. I think he writes about the most basic concerns of human beings which are, you know, love, death, birth, learning, the life of the mind. Everything that's important to me he seems to write about, and . . . his sentences are just such a joy in themselves. I feel the same way about Alice Munro. She's a completely different kind of writer, but her care and attention to language is what I admire. And I also admire, of course, her honesty and the way in which she never betrays her material. She writes about the rural poor without a sense of romanticizing it in any way or indulging it. She has a kind of rare, almost invisible, style. You hardly know it's there. Who else do I read with pleasure? I read Margaret Laurence, of course, and *The Stone Angel* was a very important book in my reading life. . . . I've just finished a book by an English writer called Muriel Spark called *Loitering With Intent*, which does for me all the things that good fiction should do . . . the sense of freshness in that work although she's written many, many novels, the aliveness of the voice telling the story, the way in which the sentences have been turned, and the story itself. Everything is positive and poignant.

When my last child started school, someone said to me, "What are you going to do now that you have this half day to yourself?" Almost without thinking, I said "I'm going to write 100 poems." And that's essentially what I did in the next two or three years. . . . I wrote out of a kind of ignorance.

I didn't know how one writes a poem and I was certainly not writing what was fashionable at the time. But I always felt that I was right. I don't often have that feeling writing prose, but I never had any kind of hesitation in the poetry I wrote. I loved the idea of form . . . of taking free verse and giving it your own sense of form. The satisfaction of getting every word right. I used to tinker with them endlessly. . . . It gave me a satisfaction that I have never had writing novels, because a novel is a big thing and it has lots of little corners you never feel are perfectly conceived. But with a poem you can get it just right. I heard Gary Geddes

once describe a poem as a toy that you can carry around with you and I think I had that sensation, of creating these little artifacts. I wrote about the kinds of things that I write about in my fiction . . . about human oddities.

. . . I used to make a conscious effort to have an idea in every poem, even if it was simply an observation. . . . I wrote about people. Every poem of these 100 poems that I wrote was about a different person. Some of them were my own children, some of them were people that I simply saw on the bus or walking around . . . one poem was about a man I saw sitting on his front lawn one night. It was a hot night in Ottawa, and he was typing at an ironing board that he had carried out onto the grass. It seemed such a strange sight, and I was dying to know what he was typing. In very much the same way, you want to see what books people are reading when you see them on an airplane. That kind of curiosity about other people that you really can't satisfy.

. . . I think you find yourself writing about certain kinds of ideas or themes, and naturally those are the things which are concerning you at any particular time in your life. . . . what I find myself writing about is the mystery of human personality: why people are a certain way. What they do. What they do when they come in conjunction with other people. . . . I'm interested in the nine-tenths of their lives which goes on inside their heads. My books are sometimes reviewed as being about ordinary people, and that word "ordinary" always amazes me, because what is an "ordinary" person? I certainly couldn't begin to say. There are people whose surfaces are ordinary, I suppose, but as for the nine-tenths which is inside the head, I can't imagine that anyone would be "ordinary." No one is ordinary to himself or herself. Everyone is capable of acts of courage or cowardice or heroism or love. This may be a romantic notion, but I think that people are mainly extraordinary. This is one of the things that I write about.

I also find myself writing about those moments in which people who are solitary in many aspects of their lives suddenly sense a kind of communion with other people and with the universe. Those transcendental moments that we all occasionally have. I think poets have always been interested in those moments which [Robert] Browning called "the everlasting moment." I'm interested in writing about those particular moments, those occasions. And all of these moments, of course, come out of observation and the joy of observation, which is something that I feel I am very fortunate to have. I'm very interested in the lives of writers. I think all writers are concerned about finding a voice which is really theirs. I think it finally comes for most writers, but it takes a long time to become established. We would all like to think that someone could experience our stories and identify with them immediately, just as they recognize the sound of our voice over the telephone. I think to a certain extent . . . I do have a style, which is my own, which is recognizable. Some of it may simply be because I write about a certain kind of material, and the content is what declares it mine. But I like to think that something of my voice is there, perhaps learned from other writers, but nevertheless my own.

. . ."Funny feeling, eh?"

"Yes," I said. "As though we were a tray of biscuits."

"That's right," he said crookedly.

Surprised, I asked, "What are you here for?"

"The old water works," he said yawning. "But nothing major."

Kidneys, bladder, urine; a diagram flashed in my brain. "That's good," I mumbled. Always polite. I cannot, even here, escape courtesy.

"What about you?" he mouthed, almost inaudible now.

"One of those female things," I whispered. "Also not major."

"You married?"

"Yes. Are you?" I asked, realizing too late that he had asked because of the nature of the complaint, not because we were comparing our status as we might had we met at a party.

"Yes," he said, "I'm married. But not happily."

"Pardon?" Courtesy again, the scented phrase. Our mother had always insisted we say pardon and, as Charleen says, we are children all our lives, obedient to echoes.

"Not happily," he said again. "Married yes," he made an effort to enunciate, "but not happily married."

A surreal testimony. It must be the anesthetic, I thought, pulling an admission like that from a sheeted stranger. The effect of the pill or perhaps the rarity of the circumstances, the two of us lying here nose to nose, almost naked under our thin sheets, horizontal in midmorning, chemical-smelling limbo, our conversation somehow crisped into truth.

"Too bad," I said with just a shade of sympathy.

"You happily married?" he asked.

"Yes," I murmured, a little ashamed at the affirmative ring in my voice. "I'm one of the lucky ones. Not that I deserve it."

"What do you mean, not that you deserve it?"

"I don't know."

"Well, you said it," he said crossly.

"I just meant that I'm not all that terrific a wife. You know, not self-sacrificial." I groped for an example. "For instance, when Martin asked me to type something for him last week. Just something short."

"Yeah?" His mouth made a circle on the white sheet.

"I said, what's the matter with Nell? That's his secretary."

"He's got a secretary, eh?"

"Yes," I admitted, again stung with guilt. This was beginning to sound like a man who didn't have a secretary. "She's skinny though," I explained. "A real stick. And he shares her with two other professors."

"I see. I see." His voice dropped off, and I thought for a minute that he'd fallen asleep.

Pressing on anyway I repeated loudly, "So I said, what's the matter with Nell?"

"And what did he say to that?" the voice came.

"Martin? Well, he just said, 'Never mind, Judith.' But then I felt so mean that I went ahead and did it anyway."

"The typing you mean?"

"Uh huh."

"So you're not such a rotten wife," he accused me.

"In a way," I said. "I did it, but it doesn't count if you're not willing." Where had I got that? Girl Guides maybe.

"I never ask my wife to type for me."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Typing I don't need."

"Maybe you ask for something else," I suggested, aware that our conversation was slipping over into a new frontier.

"Just to let me alone, to let me goddamned alone. Every night she has to ask me what I did all day. At the plant. She wants to know, she says. I tell her, look, I lived through it once, do I have to live through it twice?"

"I see what you mean," I said, hardly able to remember what we were talking about.

"You do?" Far away in his nest of sheets he registered surprise.

"Yes, I know exactly what you mean. As my mother used to say, 'I don't want to chew my cabbage twice.' "

"You mean you don't ask your husband what he did all day?"

"Well," I said growing weary, "no. I don't think I ever do. Poor Martin."

"Christ," he said as two nurses began rolling him to the doorway. "Christ. I wish I was married to you."

"Thank you," I called faintly. "Thank you, thank you."

Absurdly flattered, I too was wheeled away. Joy closed my eyes, and all I remember seeing after that was a blur of brilliant blue.

. . . . . .

"Living meanly is the greatest sin," Nancy Krantz tells me. "Needless economy. It thins the blood. Cuts out the heart."

It is so warm this morning that we have carried our coffee cups out on the back porch. "What about thrift?" I ask her.

"A vice," she says, "but an okay vice. Thrift, after all, implies its own raison d'être. But cheapness for its own sake is destructive."

We swap frugality stories.

She tells me about a man, a lawyer, well-to-do, with a beautiful house in Montreal, a summer place in the Rideau, annual excursions to London, the whole picture. And whenever he wanted to buy any new clothes, where do you think he went? You'll never guess. Down to the Salvation Army outlet. He'd pick through piles of old clothes until he'd find a forty-four medium. And that's what he wore. Pinstripe suits with shiny elbows. Navy blue blazers faded across the shoulders. Pants that bagged at the knees. Fuzzy along the pockets. He just didn't care. He'd take them home with him in a shopping bag and then he'd put them on and look at himself in the mirror. And he'd say, "Well, I'm no fashion plate but it only cost me three and a half bucks."

"Terrible, terrible," I breathe.

And I tell her about a widow, not wealthy, not even well-to-do, but not poverty-stricken either. She owns her own house, has an adequate pension and so on. But she had to have a breast removed, a terrible operation, she suffered terribly, cancer, and after she was discharged from the hospital she took the subway home. The subway! With a great white bandage where her left breast had been. On the subway.

"That's awful," Nancy says in a shocked whisper.

"But," I tell her, "that's not the worst part."

"What could be worse than that?" she asks.

I hesitate. For Nancy who is my good, my best friend, has never been an intimate. But I tell her anyway. The really awful thing was that the woman with the sheared-off breast riding home on the subway was my own mother.

"Oh, Judith, oh, Judith," she says. "Why didn't I tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

She gives a short harsh laugh. "That the man with the second-hand suits—was my father."

After that we sit quietly, finishing our coffee not talking much.

What have we said? Nothing much. But we have, for a minute, transcended abstractions. Have made a sort of pledge, a grim refusal to be stunned by the accidents of genes or the stopped-up world of others. We can outdistance any sorrow; what is it anyway but another abstraction, a stirring of air.

FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DISCUSSION

1. The author says of *Small Ceremonies*, "I . . . find myself writing about those moments in which people who are solitary in many aspects of their lives suddenly sense a kind of communion with other people and the universe." Find an example of such a moment in this novel. Are the excerpts such moments?

2. Read the excerpts from the novel and then watch the television version. Which did you enjoy more? Why?

3. This author says, "I don't apologize for being one of those writers who repeats her themes. I think that we all do this; most of us have a single melody that we pluck away at for most of our lives." Why might a writer repeat the same themes? Is this necessarily a bad thing?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Read *Small Ceremonies*. Why would the book be given such a title?

2. *The Box Garden* is about a woman and her mother. The mother is constantly redecorating her house, which seems a very limiting occupation to the daughter. The mother has been described as a "thwarted artist." After reading the book, would you agree with this description of the mother?

3. *Happenstance* and *A Fairly Conventional Woman* are about two people who have been married to each other for a long time. Read both novels and decide how well these two people know each other.

   Is it possible for one individual to know another completely, or will there always be spaces where two people will never meet?

4. Carol Shields' novels have been described as being about ordinary people. Are the characters in *Small Ceremonies* "ordinary"? What about those in *The Box Garden*?

   What, in your view, makes a person "ordinary"?

RELEVANT WORKS

Shields, Carol. *Small Ceremonies*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1976. 179 p. A novel. Winner of the Canadian Authors' Association Award for best novel (1977).

_____. *The Box Garden*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1977. A novel.

_____. *Happenstance*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1980. A novel.

_____. *A Fairly Conventional Woman*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1982. 216 p. A novel.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Carol Shields writes:
"I live in Winnipeg, Manitoba, teach part-time at the University of Manitoba, sit on the Winnipeg Library Board, and am Fiction Editor of *Horizons* magazine. I have published two books of poetry, one book of criticism, and four novels. A new book of short fiction entitled *Various Miracles* was published in May, 1985, by General Publishing. My first stage play was produced by the Black Hole Theatre in November, 1984. In 1983, I won first prize in the CBC National Drama Competition, and in 1984 I won second prize in the short-story division. I am married to a professor of civil engineering and have five children."

Carol Shields received an M.A. in English from the University of Ottawa in 1975. Her thesis was revised and subsequently published as *Susannah Moodie: Voice and Vision* (1977). Her two collections of poetry, *Others* and *Intersect*, appeared in 1972 and 1974, respectively.

A conversation with

MICHEL TREMBLAY

I was born in Montreal, in 1942, on the twenty-fifth of June, in the eastern part of Montreal, on Fabre Street, during the war. Right in the middle of the war.

. . . my father was a printing man in a printing house, and during the war they used to print novels here. We couldn't get novels from France, so the old nineteenth-century authors were published in Montreal. So I began reading very young and I read things that I wouldn't have read otherwise, being a child. I read [Emile] Zola when I was fourteen or fifteen years old, for instance, or [Honore de] Balzac, but just because the books were in the house. Even adults at that time couldn't read these authors. But I didn't know that, so I read them.

I didn't go to school very long. I finished my high school in '59, I think, or 1960. But after my seventh grade, I won some kind of prize . . . to go and get educated free because at that time education was not free. So I went and stayed only a few months because I hated that kind of education. I used to educate myself in a way. I read what I wanted at home and I liked to choose what I wanted to learn. I came back to ordinary school and I finished my high school. So my education is self-made, if you want.

. . . I was born right in the middle of the war so there were not many men around. The men, the fathers, were at war, and the other men were too old or too young to be men. So I was raised by five women. . . . And the first human beings that I heard and that I saw react to that man's society that was made by man for man were women. So I was raised in front of women, hearing women talk about men and talking about society and their miseries. . . . We were twelve people in a seven-room apartment in Montreal, three families living together, and I was the youngest of all these people. My nearest brother is ten years older than I am. So these women, alone in that house when the men were not there, used to talk about everything in front of me. What is *oublier* in English? Forgetting. Forgetting that I was there. So I used to hear things that a child doesn't usually hear. So I never had for my parents this kind of worshipping your parents when you're a child. . . . When I was fifteen years old I already knew they were not perfect, so I didn't have the problems realizing that my father and my mother were not perfect human beings. I knew it.

When I decided to become a writer, it wasn't because of books; it was mostly because of TV. Televison came in '52. I was exactly ten years old. And I remember that there was a show I liked very much and I watched that show for two or three years. And I used to watch the credits at the end, and I didn't quite understand what these credits meant. And there was one credit that read, "words by such and such." And once I asked my mother what it meant, and she told me that what the characters were saying was written by a man called such and such. And it was, at the same time, a great discovery and a great depression time for me. First, I realized that these characters were actors, and somebody wrote all that stuff for them, and I was depressed for a few days or a few weeks. And then, after, I said it must be wonderful to say things hiding under somebody else, or behind somebody else. And I said, "One day I'm going to be that man," and I did everything I could to become that man.

. . . when I was thirteen or fourteen years old, I had big problems in my life. I was discovering things that I couldn't talk about with my parents, because, in 1955, there were things you couldn't talk about with your parents. And I needed to say these things, so I wrote like somebody else would have painted or whatever. . . . And I wrote, but the things that I had to say were so difficult to express that instead of writing them in the first degree [person], saying "I have this and this problem," I had characters talk for me. I still have here a play I wrote when I was seventeen years old. . . . And when you read it, it's amazing how you find in this, in these dialogues, everything that I've written after.

Everything is there. It's true that you always are the child you were in a way. But it's very strange when you can check like that and see what you wrote twenty-five years earlier and you see the themes of what I wrote after are there.

. . . after, when I wrote plays when I was a grown-up, I was always hidden under my characters. . . . when I wrote my first real novel, *The Fat Woman Next Door Is Pregnant,* I did this because I just finished a cycle of eleven plays and I didn't have anything else to say, in theatre. And, somehow, I wanted for the first time, I felt like putting myself inside what I was—inside my work, inside what I was doing as a person. So I, for a year and a half, thought and talked about writing one novel in which the narrator would be me, in a way. I wouldn't say it was me. It wouldn't be written in the first person, like somebody talking, but then you could guess that the man writing was the man telling the story. So I did write *The Fat Woman Next Door Is Pregnant* to put myself in a book, and I did, and I discovered something wonderful. I discovered that for the first time in my life—that was six years ago, I was thirty-five—I discovered that I could say how much I loved my characters. Before that, my theatre is very aggressive, my plays are aggressive, because my characters have horrible things to say to each other, but I'm never there to say that I love them. And for the first time in that book I could say that as the narrator. So everything in that book is not milder but it's more tender than what I wrote before.

Now that I discovered what I could do with theatre and then what I could do with novels, I've been going from one to the other for six years. After *The Fat Woman Next Door Is Pregnant*, I wrote a play, and then I wrote the second novel. Then I wrote a play, then the third novel. Then last year I wrote, in November '83, I wrote a play . . . which will be produced next season. And then—now I'm writing the fourth book. And one year I write for the theatre, still saying aggressive things, and then one year I write a novel. They're all sequels to the first one, so it's a story in four books. There will be more books, but I'm . . . at the end of the fourth one now. And it's still true that I can . . . I can personally tell my version of the world in novels. And it's a wonderful feeling, talking for yourself.

When I wrote *Les belles-soeurs* nineteen years ago, I did not write a political play. It became a political play later. It took on meanings that were there but that were not conscious on my part when I wrote it. I wrote *Les belles-soeurs* because I thought that, before my generation, the theatre was mostly a theatre of men. There were very good plays, but written by men in a way for men, and lots of time the female characters were feeble characters, were not as good characters as the male characters. And I felt like describing and having women who raised me talking for the first time with their real problems in their real language. And I did that, but I was completely unconscious of what I was doing. *Les belles-soeurs* came from a need I had to describe this, but it became political when we did it . . . we did it for the first time in '68, right in the middle of the Quiet Revolution. And these women took on political meanings that were very interesting because writing that way was political. But I didn't know it. And it might be, it could be, the best way to write literature.

When I wrote *Les belles-soeurs*, I really wanted to write, to structure, a play like the ancient Greek writers did. I discovered the ancient Greek writers by myself, because I didn't go to school very long . . . and I found out that it was wonderful to have a group of people, a chorus, representing everybody in a country. . . . I took fifteen women. I made a Greek chorus out of them. And I thought that one woman telling her dull life is one woman but five women doing a quintet or a chorus about their rotten lives . . . they are everybody. So having fifteen women is like having all the women in the working-class people of Quebec talking about their problems. That's what I like most about the ancient Greek theatre. The chorus of one city comes out and they speak as one voice, but this one voice is everybody's voice.

Singling out people with a projector [spotlight] came from the fact that *Les belles-soeurs* is mostly a play about non-communication. Like I always say, if these

women had talked together last night they would have made a revolution. And the play is structured in such a way that when they talk to each other they only say things that are not very interesting, and they're a chorus, and they talk at the same time to the public. But when they have a personal problem, instead of telling it to the women, trying to solve it, they come in front of a projector and they tell us, the public, the problem. . . . And, theatrically, it's very, very, very, effective because you feel that you have fifteen women talking to you all that time but they don't say anything interesting to themselves, to each other. So it's very interesting, because at the end of the play it's like as if nothing happened. But hundreds of things happened to you, the public, who saw it.

The universal characteristics of *Les belles-soeurs* lie in the first degree of humanity that I put in them. Québécois literature was influenced by French literature, but then there was an élite who tried too much at one time to look like, or to sound like, Paris. And I think that the universality of *Les belles-soeurs* lies in the fact that I chose to try to talk to everybody in the world, using the language of just a few people in Montreal. That's universality. For the first time I think that a Québécois writer didn't have the complex of inferiority, of thinking that if he wrote like his mother wrote nobody in the world would understand her, which is false.

. . . I went to see a Québécois film with my friend, André Brassard, who became my director after. And we hated that film very much and we didn't quite know why. So, going out of the movie house, we discussed together, to try to discover why we didn't like that film. And we discovered that what we hated about it was the fact that the characters in that film talked a language that nobody in the world ever talked. They didn't speak Québécois. They didn't speak French from France. They didn't speak *joual* [French-Canadian dialect]. They spoke some kind of a written language. They spoke like you write when you write a book. And we hated that. And I said to my friend, André, what if I tried to write a sketch between two women coming back from the funeral parlor? Just for fun. Just to check if it's possible to write like people really talk. And, three days after, instead of having two characters, I had fifteen characters, and two months later *Les belles-soeurs* was written. It really came from a need. When I discovered that I could be artistic and be a writer using the language that my mother talked [*joual*], I freaked out. I loved it, and I used it and I wrote *Les belles-soeurs* just in a single month—just from trying to transcribe everything I heard from women when I was young.

And you know that *joual*, which is the way that eastern working people talk, was born in the twentieth century, because in the nineteenth century, Québec was a rural country, and Montreál became very important . . . because of the money, because of the factories. So families came from . . . the country to the city. The women kept the French in the house, and the men worked in English. So the men used to bring back English words, but then the women didn't want to become English, so the women kept the French. But then they were in a big city and their language changed. They used English words, but instead of using English words like the French people in France . . . what Québécois people did was invent words that came from English but say them in French and use them as if they were French. There is one example that I find very funny. You know that when, in the country, when you don't have toilets in the house, the toilets are in the back of the house. And in the nineteenth century they were called back houses, the back house, and people in Québec changed from back house to *becus*, and we called—we still sometime—call the toilets *les becus*, and it comes from the back house. So we did that to the English language. We changed words so they became new French words that nobody else in the world used but us.

I would like to write something and be able to tell to myself when I die that everything I wrote in my life is connected. I want to produce some kind of a mosaic in which each work is a different color of the same painting. And everything I write—more the novels than the plays probably—are like impressionist painters. Every book is a color.

GERMAINE:

Yeah, it surprised me too. They came this morning, right after you left. I heard the doorbell, I went to answer it, and there's this big fellow standing in the hall. Oh, you would have liked him, Linda, just your type. About twenty-two, maybe twenty-three, dark curly hair, you know nice little moustache. Really handsome. Anyway, he says to me, "Are you the lady of the house, Mme. Germaine Lauzon?" I said, "That's me all right," and he says, "Good, I've brought your stamps." Linda, I was so excited, I didn't know what to say. Next thing I knew, two men were bringing in the boxes, and the other one's giving me this big speech. What a smoothie, you should've heard him, Linda. And so good-looking . . . I know you would have liked him.

LINDA:

Well, come on. What did he say?

GERMAINE:

I can't remember, I was too excited. I think it was something about the company he works for, and how glad they are I won the stamps . . . That I was very lucky, you know . . . Me, I didn't know what to say. I wish your father had been here, he could have talked to him. I didn't even thank him . . .

LINDA:

A million stamps. Jeez, we'll spend the rest of our lives just putting them in the books. Four crates of 'em!

GERMAINE:

There's only three with stamps. The other one's booklets. But look, I had an idea, we'll never be able to do it alone. You going out tonight?

LINDA:

Yeah, Robert's supposed to call me . . .

GERMAINE:

Why don't you go out tomorrow night? Listen, I had an idea. I phoned all my sisters, your father's sister, and I've been to see the neighbours, and I've invited them all over to paste stamps with us tonight. I'm gonna give a stamp-pasting party. Isn't that a good idea? I bought some peanuts and potato chips and I've sent the kids to get some coke . . .

. . . . . .

The door opens suddenly and PIERRETTE GUERIN comes in.

PIERRETTE:

Hi, everybody!

THE OTHERS:

Pierrette!

LINDA:

Great, it's Aunt Pierrette!

ANGELINE:

Oh my God, Pierrette!

GERMAINE:

What are you doing here? I told you I never wanted to see you again.

PIERRETTE:
I heard that my big sister, Germaine, had won a million stamps, so I decided to come over and have a look. *sees ANGELINE* Well, I'll be goddamned! Angéline! What are you doing here?

Everyone looks at ANGELINE.

ANGELINE:
My God! I'm caught.

GERMAINE:
What do you mean, Angéline?

GABRIELLE:
How come you're talking to Mlle. Sauvé like that?

ROSE: You oughtta be ashamed!

PIERRETTE:
Why? We're real good friends, aren't we, 'Géline?

ANGELINE:
Oh! I think I'm going to faint!

ANGELINE pretends to faint.

RHEAUNA:
Good heavens, Angéline!

ROSE:
She's dead!

RHEAUNA:
What?

GABRIELLE:
Don't be ridiculous! Rose, you're getting carried away again.

PIERRETTE:
She hasn't even fainted. She's only pretending.

PIERRETTE approaches ANGELINE.

GERMAINE:
Don't you touch her!

PIERRETTE:
Mind your own business! She's my friend.

RHEAUNA:
What do you mean, your friend?

GERMAINE:
Are you trying to tell us that Mademoiselle Sauvé is a friend of yours!

PIERRETTE:
Of course she is! She comes to see me at the club almost every Friday night.

ALL THE WOMEN:
What!

RHEAUNA:
That's impossible.

PIERRETTE:
Ask her! Hey, 'Géline, isn't it true what I'm saying? Come on, stop playing dead and answer me. Angéline, we all know you're faking! Tell them, isn't it true you come to the Club?

ANGELINE: *after a silence*
Yes, it's true.

RHEAUNA:
Oh, Angéline! Angéline!

SOME OF THE WOMEN:
Dear God, this is dreadful!

SOME OTHER WOMEN:
Dear God, this is horrible!

LINDA, GINETTE & LISE:
Holy shit, that's great!

The lights go out.

RHEAUNA:
Angéline! Angéline!

Spot on ANGELINE and RHEAUNA.

ANGELINE:
Rhéauna, you must understand . . .

RHEAUNA:
Don't you touch me! Get away!

THE WOMEN:
Who would have thought . . . Such a horrible thing!

RHEAUNA:
I'd never have thought this of you. You, in a club. And every Friday night! It can't be true.

ANGELINE:
I don't do anything wrong, Rhéauna. All I have is a coke.

THE WOMEN:
In a club! In a night club!

GERMAINE:
God only know what she does there.

ROSE:
Maybe she tries to get picked up.

ANGELINE:
But I tell you, I don't do anything wrong!

PIERRETTE:
It's true, she doesn't do anything wrong.

ROSE, GERMAINE & GABRIELLE:
Shut up, you devil, shut up!

RHEAUNA:
You're no longer my friend, Angéline. I don't know you.

ANGELINE:
Listen to me, Rhéauna, you must listen! I can explain everything if you'll only let me . . .

ROSE, GERMAINE, & GABRIELLE:
A club! The fastest road to hell!

ALL THE WOMEN: *except the girls*
The road to hell, the road to hell! If you go there, you'll lose your soul! Cursed drinking, cursed dancing! That's the kind of place where our men go wrong, and spend their money on women of sin!

ROSE, GERMAINE, & GABRIELLE:
Women of sin, like you, Pierrette!

ALL THE WOMEN: *except the girls*
Shame on you, Angéline Sauvé, to spend your time in this sinful way!

RHEAUNA:
But Angéline, a club! It's worse than hell!

PIERRETTE: *laughing heartily*
If hell is anything like the club I work at, I wouldn't mind an eternity there!

ROSE, GERMAINE, & GABRIELLE:
Shut up, Pierrette, the devil has your tongue!

LINDA, GINETTE, & LISE:
The devil? Come on! Get with the times! The clubs are not the end of the world! They're no worse than any place else, they're fun! They're lots of fun, the clubs are lots of fun.

THE WOMEN:
Ah! Youth is blind! Youth is blind! You're gonna lose yourselves, you foolish girls, you're gonna lose yourselves, and then you'll come crying to us. But it'll be too late! It'll be too late! Watch out! You be careful of these cursed places! We don't always know it when we fall, but when we get back up, it's too late!

LISE:
Too late! It's too late! Oh my God, it's too late!

GERMAINE:
I hope at least you'll go to confession, Angéline Sauvé!

. . . . . .

LISETTE:
. . . Oh, that reminds me, the children in the parish are organizing a variety night for next month. I hope you can all make it because it should be very impressive. They've been working on it for ages . . .

DES-NEIGES:
What's on the programme?

LISETTE:
Well, it's quite interesting. They're going to have a whole lot of numbers. Mme. Gladu's little boy is going to sing . . .

ROSE:
Not again! I'm getting sick of that kid. You know, ever since he went on television, his mother's had her nose in the air. She thinks she's a real star!

LISETTE:
But the child has a lovely voice.

ROSE:
Oh yeah? Well, he looks like a girl with his mouth all puckered up like a turkey's ass.

GABRIELLE:
Rose!

LISETTE:
Diane Aubin will give a demonstration of aquatic swimming at the city pool. That's where it's all taking place, you know. It should be a stunning display.

ROSE:
Any door prizes?

LISETTE:
Oh, yes, lots. And the final event of the evening will be a giant bingo.

THE OTHER WOMEN: *except the girls*
A bingo!

Blackout.

When the lights come back up, the women are all at the edge of the stage.

LISETTE:
Ode to Bingo!

While ROSE, GERMAINE, GABRIELLE, THERESE and MARIE-ANGE recite the Ode to Bingo, the four other women call out bingo numbers in counterpoint.

ROSE, GERMAINE, GABRIELLE, THERESE
& MARIE-ANGE:
Me, there's nothing in the world that I like more than bingo. You know, we organize one in the parish almost every month. I get ready two days in advance; I'm a nervous wreck, I can't sit still, I can't even think about anything else. When the big day arrives, I'm so excited I can't do a bit of work around the house. But the minute supper's over, I put on my Sunday best, and not even a freight train would keep me out of the lady's house where we're going to play. I love playing bingo! I adore playing bingo! There's nothing in the world that I like more than bingo! As soon as we arrive, we get rid of our coats, and head straight for the room where we're going to play. Sometimes it's the living-room the lady has cleared, sometimes it's the kitchen, and there's even times when we use the bedroom. We sit down at the tables, hand out the cards, set up the chips, and the game begins!

The women who are calling the numbers continue alone for a moment.

I'm telling you, I get so excited I go right off my rocker. I'm all mixed up, I sweat like a pig, I screw up the numbers, I put my chips in the wrong squares, I make the caller repeat the numbers. Oh, I get into a terrible state! I love playing bingo! I adore playing bingo! There's nothing in the world that I like more than bingo! The game's almost over! I've got three more

tries. Two on top and once across! I need the B-14! Give me the B-14! The B-14! The B-14! I look at the others . . . Shit, they've got as much chance as me. What am I gonna do? I've gotta win! I've gotta win! I've gotta win!

LISETTE:
B-14!

THE OTHERS:
Bingo! Bingo! I've won! I knew it! I knew I couldn't lose! I've won! Hey, what did I win?

. . . . . .

GERMAINE looks at all the women.

What's going on around here?

THE OTHERS:
Well . . . a . . . I don't know . . . really. . . .

They pretend to search for the booklets.
GERMAINE stations herself in front of the door.

GERMAINE:
Where are my stamps?

ROSE:
Come on, Germaine, let's look for them.

GERMAINE:
They're not in the box, and they're not on the table. I want to know what's happened to my stamps!

OLIVINE: *pulling stamps out from under her clothes*
Stamps? Stamps . . . stamps . . .

She laughs.

THERESE:
Mme. Dubuc, hide that . . . Goddamn it, Mme. Dubuc!

MARIE-ANGE:
Dear Ste-Anne!

DES-NEIGES:
Pray for us!

GERMAINE:
But her clothes are full of them! What the . . . she's got them everywhere! Here . . . and here . . . Thérèse . . . Don't tell me it's you.

THERESE:
Good heavens, no! I swear, I had no idea!

GERMAINE:
Let me see your purse.

THERESE:
Germaine, if that's all the faith you have in me . . .

ROSE:
Germaine, don't be ridiculous!

GERMAINE:
You too, Rose, I want to see your purse. I want to see all your purses. Every one of them!

DES-NEIGES:
I refuse! I've never been so insulted!

YVETTE:
Me neither.

LISETTE:
I'll never set foot in here again!

GERMAINE grabs THERESE's bag and opens it. She pulls out several books.

GERMAINE:
Ahah! I knew it! I bet it's the same with all of you! You bastards!! You won't get out of here alive! I'll knock the daylights out of every one of you!

PIERRETTE:
I'll help you, Germaine. Nothing but a pack of thieves! And they look down their noses at me!

GERMAINE:
Show me your purses.

She grabs ROSE's bag.

Look at that, and that!

She grabs another purse.

More here. And look, still more! You too, Mlle. Bibeau? There's only three, but even so!

ANGELINE:
Oh, Rhéauna, you too!

GERMAINE:
All of you, thieves! The whole bunch of you, you hear me? Thieves!

MARIE-ANGE:
You don't deserve all those stamps.

DES-NEIGES:
Yeah, why you more than anyone else?

ROSE:
You've made us feel like shit with your million stamps!

GERMAINE:
But those stamps are mine!

LISETTE:
They ought to be for everyone!

THE OTHERS:
Yeah, everyone!

GERMAINE:
But they're mine! Give them back to me!

THE OTHERS:
Never!

MARIE-ANGE:
There's still lots more in the boxes. Let's help ourselves.

DES-NEIGES:
Good idea.

YVETTE:
I'm gonna fill up my purse.

GERMAINE:
Stop! Keep your hands off!

THERESE:
Here, Mme. Dubuc, take these! Here's some more.

MARIE-ANGE:
Come here, Mlle, Verrette, there's tons of them. Give me a hand.

PIERRETTE:
Get your hands out of there!

GERMAINE:
My stamps! My stamps!

ROSE:
Help me, Gaby, I took too many!

GERMAINE:
My stamps! My stamps!

A huge battle follows. The women steal all the stamps they can. PIERRETTE and GERMAINE try to stop them. LINDA and LISE stay seated in the corner and watch without moving. Screams are heard as some of the women begin fighting.

MARIE-ANGE:
Give me those, they're mine!

ROSE:
That's a lie, they're mine!

LISETTE: *to GABY*
Will you let go of me! Let me go!

They start throwing stamps and booklets at one another. Everybody grabs all they can get their hands on, throwing stamps everywhere, out the door, even out the window. OLIVINE DUBUC starts cruising around in her wheelchair singing "O Canada." A few women go out with their loot of stamps. ROSE and GABRIELLE stay a bit longer than the others.

GERMAINE:
My sisters! My own sisters!

GABRIELLE and ROSE go out. The only ones left in the kitchen are GERMAINE, LINDA, and PIERRETTE. GERMAINE collapses into a chair.

My stamps! my stamps!

PIERRETTE puts her arms around GERMAINE's shoulders.

PIERRETTE:
Don't cry, Germaine.

GERMAINE:
Don't talk to me. Get out! You're no better than the rest of them!

PIERRETTE:
But . . .

GERMAINE:
Get out! I never want to see you again!

PIERRETTE:
But I tried to help you! I'm on your side, Germaine!

GERMAINE:
Get out, and leave me alone! Don't speak to me. I don't want to see anyone!

PIERRETTE goes out slowly. LINDA also heads towards the door.

LINDA:
It'll be some job cleaning all that up!

GERMAINE:
My God! My God! My stamps! There's nothing left! Nothing! Nothing! My beautiful new home! My lovely furniture! Gone! My stamps! My stamps!

She falls to her knees beside the chair, picking up the stamps remaining. She is crying very hard. We hear all the others outside singing "O Canada." As the song continues, GERMAINE regains her courage. And she finishes the "O Canada" with the others, standing at attention, with tears in her eyes. A rain of stamps falls slowly from the ceiling. . . .

CURTAIN

FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DISCUSSION

1. Tremblay says the women in *Les belles-soeurs* "took on political meanings." The play may be considered an allegory of the economic and political domination of Québec by English Canada. Does the excerpt support this interpretation?

2. "One woman telling her dull life," the author says, "is one woman but five women doing a quintet or a chorus about their rotten lives . . . is like having all the women in the working-class people of Québec talking about their problems." What about these lives does the play suggest is "rotten" and "dull"?

3. His plays, Tremblay says, "are aggressive, because my characters have horrible things to say to each other, but I'm never there to say that I love them." Is Tremblay's love for his characters nevertheless evident in *Les belles-soeurs*?

4. Read the excerpt *before* seeing the television performance of *Les belles-soeurs*. Were you surprised at how much emotion and life the actors found in the words of the script? What does this suggest about how to *read* a play?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Find out more about the Chorus in ancient Greek drama. How has Tremblay adapted the Greek chorus in *Les belles-soeurs*?

2. Tremblay was one of the first writers in Québec to use *joual* in literature. Find out more about *joual* and the controversy over its literary use which *Les belles-soeurs* helped to fuel.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Born in 1942 in Montreál's industrial east end, Michel Tremblay attended the Graphic Arts Institute of Québec after completing Grade Eleven and became a linotype operator. He began writing while in high school and in 1966 completed his first collection of tales, *Contes pour buveurs attardés* (trans. *Stories for Late Night Drinkers*, 1978). "Les belles-soeurs," one of Tremblay's best-known plays, was first produced in 1968 and sparked considerable debate in Québec about the use of *joual* in the theatre. Tremblay's short film script, *Françoise Durocher, waitress* (1972), directed by André Brassard, was awarded three Canadian Genie prizes in 1972. His first full-length film script, *Il était une fois dans l'est*, also directed by Brassard, represented Canada in the Cannes and Chicago film festivals in 1974.

By the age of forty-two, Michel Tremblay had written eighteen plays, two musical comedies, six novels, one collection of tales and five film scripts. He has also translated plays by Aristophanes, Paul Zindel, and Tennessee Williams. In 1984, Michel Tremblay was honored as "*Chevalier de l'ordre des Arts et des lettres de France.*"

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NOTES

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Al Purdy

"I would like to write something and be able to tell myself when I die that everything I wrote in my life is connected. I want to produce some kind of mosaic in which each work is a different color of the same painting. And everything I write — more the novels than the plays probably — are like impressionist painters. Every book is a color."

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Gwendolyn MacEwen

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